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DANDY:

A NOVEL.

BY

JEAN MIDDLEMASS,

AUTHOR OF 'SACKCLOTH AND BROADCLOTH,' 'WILD GEORGIE,' 'SEALED BY A KISS,' 'INNOCENCE AT PLAY,' ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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DANDY.

CHAPTER I.

POOR LITTLE PRISONER.

IN untidy, neglected, ill-ventilated attic, rubbish of every kind heaped pell-mell in the corners; boxes piled well-nigh to the ceiling, which is low and sloping, and about which the spiders have weaved many a cobwebby fabric.

In the very centre of the room only, there is a free carpetless space of black-looking, unwashed boards, and in this space a child's broken cart and an old tin pot are lying, and

a boy of about four is battering against them with a pewter spoon. He is a sickly, frail-looking child, and wears a suit of blue sailor clothes, which, to all appearance, has been bought at the nearest slop-shop, and is much too large for him; his hair is cut so closely all over his head that you instantly have the impression that he, being too young to have been in prison himself, must yet be very nearly allied to convicts. His eyes alone make you look at him twice; they are so large, and have such a piteous expression as though mutely upbraiding fate, that even strangers would stop to wonder what has made this young life so sad.

The child seldom speaks; he sits for hours on the floor battering his old pot, and looking occasionally with those wistful eyes at the door, as though expecting some one to come in, at last turning away disappointed, with a sort of sob, when he goes on playing with his spoon and pot.

Poor little Dandy! What has he done to have the hard hand of destiny laid so heavily

upon him? People tell you that children have no strong feelings, that plenty to eat and a few kind words will speedily accustom them to any lot in life, to any change in the faces around them.

If this be true, why did Dandy look so persistently miserable—he who was once a bright, somewhat unruly boy become suddenly transformed into a silent, sad-looking child?

The Fords were not exactly unkind to him; he had to eat of whatever was going, and the food, if not as delicate as that to which he had been accustomed, was at least plentiful, for Mrs Ford, for reasons easily guessed, did not want Dandy to slip through her fingers, and the child looked ethereal enough to make such a contingency very probable. Susan had, even on more than one occasion, put her work away and taken him up a piece of cake, which, however, he never seemed to care for; sometimes she would stay to have a game with the little prisoner for a quarter of an hour. Yes, that was the secret of Dandy's hopeless misery. He was a prisoner! Never since he had

been carried off had he been allowed to quit that attic.

He could see just a tiny bit of blue sky through the high up sloping window; but the sun never shone into the room, it was always cold and drear and sad, like poor little Dandy's heart, and 'Me isn't a naughty boy, me tries to be very dood,' he would repeat over and over again, as though reasoning with Destiny, whenever his jailers left him, and, as was invariably the case, he heard the key grate in the lock behind them. He never saw any one but Mrs Ford and Susan, the other individuals who had been actively employed in promoting the tragedy of his life kept in the background.

So far, then, Dandy knew nothing of what was going on in Vale Place, where the Fords lived, miniature world as Mrs Ford's house was with its many lodgers; nor—each busy individual revolving round a different axis—did they conjecture aught of the patient little sickly boy who, the victim of self-interest or spite, was wearing away youth's brightest days in solitary confinement not a hundred yards from them.

The only time Dandy took a really restive view of his position was when darkness came.

Lady George, who had a great horror of children being frightened, never allowed him to go to bed without a light in his room. When then night arrived, and Dandy, all alone, saw the darkening shadows creeping up all around him, he would set up spasmodic shrieks of fear, at last developing into a continuous scream, till Mrs Ford or Susan brought him a candle.

One night, when he had been quite ten days at the Fords, no notice was taken of poor Dandy's repeated piteous appeals to have a light, and the poor little man's screams became so fearful as to make more than one of the inmates of Mrs Ford's house wish that she would not take lodgers with children, or that if she did, they would keep them quiet. At last an old body, more benevolent than the rest, went down to the Fords' back parlour to make an appeal against what she imagined to be the ill-usage of some luckless child.

Neither the mother nor daughter were

there, but in an arm-chair by the fireplace was seated Jim Burritt.

'I beg your pardon,' said the old woman, 'I wanted Mrs Ford. That poor child's shrieks go through my head that awful, I thought she might stop them.'

'What child?' asked Jim, who, shut in the parlour at the bottom of the house, had heard nothing.

'I don't know what child,' answered the old woman, 'but there's one upstairs a-crying for a light.'

At that moment a prolonged scream from Dandy reached Jim through the open door.

'This won't never do,' he said, as, snatching up a flat candlestick, he ran upstairs, three steps at a time.

The key of the door was in Susan Ford's pocket, but that was of no importance to Jim; he set his foot and his shoulder against it and forced it open without more ado.

'What are you howling for, young un?' he asked, rather fiercely.

The sight of him so awed poor Dandy that he ceased his tearless screaming and stood looking at him without attempting to

speak, then seeing Jim put down the candle on a large box, he gave a deep sigh and said,—

'I be very dood.'

It seemed to be Dandy's one fixed idea that he should not be punished if he was 'very dood.'

'You had best be good and leave off making that row, or I'll skin you alive and put you up the chimney.'

Which was not a very enlivening threat, and produced another deep sigh from the little victim.

At this minute Susan arrived. She had been out, and was dressed in flaunting finery of the very highest fashion. She put on a very simpering, would-be sweet expression when she saw Jim, but it was met by a rough reprimand.

'What the devil do you mean by leaving this child howling there to wake the whole parish. If you undertake to mind him you had best do it, unless you want us all to get blown on and lose the swag.'

Susan's manner changed at once as she heard herself thus accosted. She tossed her head and said tartly,—

'If you want a girl as will stand being driven you had best go to Smith Street to look for her and not come here.'

'I don't want no remarks and no comparisons,' answered Jim. 'You and your old mother undertook this 'ere business, and you ought to work it properly, without wanting no telling from me. I shouldn't have thought as you would have been such a fool.'

'Fool, yourself!' muttered Susan, giving him the *tu quoque* in which her class delights, and then sailing off downstairs and leaving him to settle Dandy and the candle as he felt inclined.

Susan was pleased to consider herself 'in love' with Jim Burritt—that is, she had a fancy for him; for Susan's heart being a very shallow concern, she was totally incapable of strong affection for any one. She was very angry, however, at being treated in this off-hand fashion, even by Jim, so she determined to exhibit a few airs and graces instead of receiving him with smiles and sugared words, as she usually did when he dropped into the back parlour in Vale Place of an evening.

The supper she and Mrs Ford had selected for that especial evening was sprats! The whole house was redolent of them as Jim, two or three minutes later, came downstairs, bringing little Dandy with him. Jim was by no means a bad-hearted man, though he had his weaknesses and his vices. He did not object to being instrumental in helping to conceal this poor child, without even asking who he was or where he came from. The transaction was for his own advantage —that was enough. Still he did not see why the child should be made more unhappy than was absolutely necessary ; so he brought him downstairs to spend half-an-hour in the back parlour by way of a treat. This proceeding served still farther to irritate Susan, who did not care for children at all, and hated this one in particular, if he were to be the cause of producing unpleasant words between her and Jim—words, by the way, which she in no way attempted to modify, since she received Jim in the parlour with a very tart, disagreeable expression of countenance, and left her mother to invite him to partake of their fishy cheer while she sulkily ate her

supper without speaking. Jim, to all appearance, took no notice of her mood, but, in obedience to the kindly spirit which seemed to predominate over his nature for a time, he devoted himself to an infantine conversation with Dandy, from whom, however, he did not obtain very strong encouragement. The child was shy—much shyer than a child of the lower orders would have been at the same age ; still he was old enough, and had seen enough of the manners of refined life to make him shudder with a sort of horror at the social degradation—so it instinctively was to Dandy—of eating sprats in this fusty general room at the Fords'—a place at which the upper servants in his mother's house would have turned up their airified noses.

Not succeeding in making any way with Dandy, and not being able to get a word out of Susan, Jim rose to take his leave rather earlier than usual.

'Send the little un to bed now,' he observed to Mrs Ford, as he went away, 'and don't let him out of the room in the daytime, leastwise not so as to be seen,' and taking no notice of Susan, since she chose to sulk, he went

out at the door, not, however, failing to hear a remark which she threw at him as he walked down the passage, to the effect that 'she wondered who Mr Burritt thought he was that he should come swaggering and giving his orders to folks who were every bit as clever as he was.'

If Jim Burritt had been in love with Susan Ford, her remarks and her little tempers would probably have annoyed him not a little; but the feeling he had for her was limited to mere admiration for her pretty face, and a sort of flirtatious wish to annoy Mercy, for whom he really cared, and make her jealous and more ready to accept him with his many shortcomings.

Once outside the Fords' house, he lighted his pipe and strolled leisurely along the street, thinking. Had he not got himself into a pretty considerable amount of difficulty by involving himself in this child-business, for whatever should the baby be shut up for if it was true he had no relations? No, this account 'wouldn't wash;' but as far as he himself was concerned, he rather liked the excitement of uncertainty; what

he hated the most in the world being work—steady, monotonous, slow-paced work. To him any other mode of raising the wind was far preferable, whatever it might be; but a cold sweat came over him when he thought of Mercy. He was not at all sure that he should like Mercy to be involved in any precarious enterprise. In the first place, she would disapprove of it, in the second, it would make her unhappy.

These thoughts, in a rough, crude fashion, working in his mind, he found himself after a while outside the little tailor's shop in Smith Street. It was the first time he had been there since the morning Mercy had left him to answer the Sennoor's bell, their last uncomfortable meeting having taken place in Susan's parlour. Jim had even waived the matter of the grey suit for a time in order to avoid any *rencontre* with the sonsy lass for whom he had just enough respect to feel that he was totally unworthy of her.

All the deeper, more serious reflections, however, which he had been revolving as he walked along vanished as by magic when he found himself gazing on the Amazon in

Job Jennett's window, which he now saw for the first time. What it meant he could in no wise understand. At first he thought it was intended for an effigy of Mercy, then he concluded that it was some madness of old Jennett's, as he was pleased to call Job. Altogether, he felt so completely bowled over by the sight of it, that he decided he would take just another turn in order to recover his equilibrium before he went indoors to try and replace himself on his old footing with Mercy; by which it may be inferred with truth that Jim's character was considerably wanting in depth, in that he could be carried away from any given object he had in view by so trivial an occurrence as the appearance of a wax doll in a window. It took him, however, but the space of a very few whiffs at his pipe to recover himself, and then he opened the shop-door, thus ringing the bell. Job was not there. It was club night, and he had gone out.

Mercy was in the back-room ironing as usual, though it was nearly ten o'clock; but she preferred sitting up for Job, and feeling lonely when he was out, she went on with

her work—very quietly and mechanically though. No one ever heard Mercy sing now while the irons glided along. A look half of surprise, half of pleasure, spread itself over her face when she saw him. Mercy was not one of those unwise women who give way to the feminine weakness of 'nagging.' She made a spirited stand when she considered that any point under discussion merited it; but at other times she was very easy going and facile in the terms she made, especially with those she loved.

She held out her hand to Jim, which was more than he deserved or perhaps expected, having been studying in Susan's school of late. It served to encourage him, however, and having once possessed himself of her hand he did not feel disposed to let it go in a hurry, though Mercy made one or two vain efforts to get away from him.

'No, lass,' he said, 'I have not seen you this many a day, and I have a mind to have a talk with you.'

'What have you been about that you haven't come?' she asked simply, without giving way to any recrimination.

'Well, that would be a long telling, and I doubt if business talk would interest you.'

'Everything about you interests me, Jim.'

'It's not everything that I do though, Mercy, that will bear the looking into of your two sharp eyes; still life's one uphill road without you, lass.'

'There's nothing stands between us that I know of but the public, Jim, unless it is—'

'Unless it's what, Mercy?'

'Your love for another girl,' she answered very slowly, hanging down her head as she spoke.

'I don't care one brass button for no girl in the world but you, Mercy, whatever you may think or people may choose to say, and I've just come here this very night to tell you that if you don't step in between me and fate, you'll rue the day as ever you left me to myself, that is if you've got any love for me.'

'Oh, Jim, you know quite well that I have.'

'All right, lass; then let me put up the banns to-morrow, and let us be married in three weeks.'

'Lor', Jim, whatever has made you so sharp to get married all of a sudden?'

'It's just what I told you, Mercy, it's that or destruction. If you don't choose to save me, well don't, but that's what it's come to.'

'And the public, Jim?' Mercy was a woman after all, and she by no means intended to give in on that point.

'Well, we won't have no publics if you've set your mind that desperate against them, though a public is a main line of business.'

'Oh, Jim, you are a dear good Jim,' said Mercy, delighted at having got her way.

'I don't know much about the goodness, girl,' said Jim, whose conscience pricked him just a little; 'but give us a kiss and let's conclude the bargain.'

She put up her rosy lips to meet those of the man who, though her choice, was totally unworthy of the offering, and just at that moment Job came in from the club, and a scowl spread itself over his usually smooth open brow as he noted the renewal of love tokens between these two whom he would fain have seen parted for ever.

CHAPTER II.

A REAL GENTLEMAN.

FOR some days after the sprat supper, Susan went backwards and forwards to the Armfields' house to help Venetia, who was making dresses for herself and her mother, as they were both going to a concert which was to be given about a week later by some friends of Basil, and at which Signor Belsospiro was to sing. Susan was fully aware that Venetia was in love with the Italian; she was far too acute a girl not to put together all the scraps and shreds of conversation she heard in Cobbold Place, and weave them into a tale which at least bore some semblance of the truth; nor in answer to any remarks which inadvertently fell from Venetia's lips

about the signor while she was sitting working with Susan, did the smart little dressmaker ever let out that she was in any way acquainted with the family in Smith Street where Belsospiro lodged. The one fact that Susan had not discovered was that Basil Armfield or his Italian friend were in any way interested in the disappearance of little Dandy. The subject was guarded very carefully, more especially since Mrs Armfield, generally complaining and garrulous, was not believed by either of her children to be particularly discreet, and it so befel that Venetia had never even mentioned to Miss Ford that a child of their acquaintance had been lost.

The Armfields, as previously stated, were very poor, and to keep up a genteel appearance, which was Mrs Armfield's constant endeavour, compelled them to calculate ways and means to a nicety, very often to the banishment of comfort from their interior, that is when Basil was out and no one was by to witness their little penurious shifts. For instance, they had only one maid-servant—Venetia therefore did a good deal of the

work, while Mrs Armfield herself looked after the cooking.

One bright sunshiny morning in April Venetia was superintending the turning out of her bedroom, in which Susan usually sat, and had sent that young person into the drawing-room for an hour, while she herself, her head enveloped in a white handkerchief, disturbed the cobwebs and flue. There was a knock at the street door, and before Venetia was aware of it, the one servant had admitted Captain Denis and shown him into the drawing-room where Susan was. Susan jumped up and prepared to take her departure, but he begged she would not disturb herself. Denis was too great a connoisseur in pretty women not to be struck by Susan's regular features and bright colouring. Neither Mrs Armfield nor Venetia were in by any means presentable attire, thus he was left for some minutes to a *tête-à-tête* with the little dressmaker. Needless to say he improved the occasion, and told her first with his eyes, then with his lips that she was pretty, a fact that Miss Susan knew full well before,

but which she was none the less pleased to hear from this to her 'nice-looking gentleman.' She simpered and smiled, said he was very kind to notice her, and let him look at her work, which he admired, but not so much as he did herself he told her; finishing his compliment by assuring her that she only wanted a lovely white dress like the one she was making for Miss Armfield to render her fit to take her place among the beauties of London.

Truly for a silent man, Captain Denis was not wanting in conversation on that particular morning, managing, too, before Venetia came into the room with her simple, grave, honest face to have discovered the name and address of the beaming Miss Susan Ford, who hid her face over her work on Miss Armfield's approach, lest she should note her crimson cheeks. Venetia, however, was too much taken up with the quick dressing she had had to perform, and her wonder over what Captain Denis could possibly want, to have any spare ideas left to bestow on so insignificant a person as Susan. She took no notice of her, beyond saying,—

'You can go into the other room, Miss Ford.'

Captain Denis, however, assured her that there was no occasion to disturb anybody, he had merely come in with a message from her brother, who at that early hour he imagined would not have yet gone out. The message was merely to inquire whether Basil could give him the singing-master's address, as a friend of his wanted to take some lessons. Venetia wrote it down for him, thinking as she did so that his coming to ask such a question might be a mere pretext, for she instinctively felt that Captain Denis could have no friendly feeling for either her brother or Guiseppe Belsospiro.

She was right in both premises. Denis only kept on good terms with both these men because he judged it politic to learn as much as possible of what was going on, and he had intruded himself into the interior of the Armfield establishment at an undue hour, simply because he wished to discover what Basil's home life was like. Venetia had never seen Captain Denis be-

fore, and she took a violent and intense dislike to him, to the extent of feeling quite startled by Susan Ford's remark of 'What a nice gentleman!' made sufficiently loud for him to hear it as he went down stairs. Venetia, however, had the tact not to answer, and the two girls went on with their work without farther words. Venetia gave Susan as much assistance as her other duties during the day would permit, and no incident of any moment occurred to interrupt them till Basil came home to a very late dinner, looking tired and jaded, as though he had had a hard day; but offering no explanation about what had or had not befallen.

Soon after this Susan folded up her work and went away. She was rather tired of sitting, and the night being fine, she thought she would take a little walk. She would go round by Smith Street and see Mercy Jennett. Susan went a good deal on the same plan that Denis did, namely, that it is more necessary to keep your enemies in view than your friends. Arrived close to the little tailor's Amazonian abode,

whom should she see not a hundred yards from her coming out at the door but Jim Burritt!

All the feline qualities which existed strongly in Susan, asserted themselves at the sight of him. She waited till he had walked some little distance from the house, in the opposite direction to where she stood, and then she flew after him, and pounced upon him with a sort of tigress' spring.

'I thought you had quarrelled with that minx,' she said. 'You don't suppose I should do your dirty work for you, and take care of other people's nameless offspring, if I hadn't thought you belonged to me.'

Poor little Dandy! the Fords believed he was some lone child, whose father being ashamed of him, was hiding him away from his mother who loved him.

Jim Burritt was quite a match for Susan, however, and it was playing with edge tools if she meant to have a skirmish with him. He looked at her very coolly and sneeringly for a second, then he said,—

'The child is a matter of business both to you and me; don't know as we've got any further interest in him?'

'Nonsense, Jim—answer me the truth at once. What have you been to see Mercy for?'

'That's a question now to ask a fellow. Don't see, Miss Susan Ford, as you've a right to put it.'

'I have a right. Who better? Don't I love you better than any man I've ever took up with afore, and ain't we going into the public line together. A right, indeed!'

By which outbreak of Susan's it will be seen that Jim has been going a little farther than the circumstances of the case warranted.

'Look here,' he said, 'don't you flounce and bang about, 'cos it ain't no mortal use. I was sweetheartin' with Mercy long afore I ever set eyes on your pink and white doll's face, and I ain't off with my old love, d'ye see.'

It was a brutal speech, but then Jim, in spite of his fine would-be-gentleman airs, was moulded in such coarse metal that he could not understand how even an unkind action, if accompanied by gentle words, inflicts less pain than when it is attended by harsh ones.

The tears filled Susan's eyes—heartless little flirt though she was. Whether it was wounded pride or baffled love that produced them, she could not have told herself, the feeling was so mixed. She dashed them away, however, with the back of her hand.

'You sha'n't marry Mercy,' she said fiercely; 'if you do I'll up and tell the whole story about that brat.'

A strong oath fell from Jim's lips, and he doubled up his fist as though he meant to strike her, then he thought better of it and burst out laughing.

'Tell,' he said, 'tell if you've a mind. You'll get locked up in a police cell for your pains, and then you'll be clear out of the way for a bit.'

'I sha'n't go into no police cell, unless you come along of me. I ain't such a fool as to blab of myself and let you off. No, my boy, if its swinging you mean—as all this will end in—we'll swing together.'

'Well, you are the darndest little fool as ever was blessed with a picter face,' observed Jim, still laughing noisily, as though he considered the thing a good joke.

'You may grin like a cat or roar like a bull,' replied Susan indignantly, 'but it won't make me less determined. I'll have the best of it with you—of that you may be very sure. My stars! to think I am going to be put upon by you, when I could get any gentleman in the land to make love to me, and be obliged for the chance. Why, there was the nicest-looking swell at Miss Armfield's to-day, and he asked me for my address straight off.'

'Best give it,' said Jim sententiously.

'And him an officer in the army too,' went on Susan, so intent on giving the account of her conquest that she neither stopped to listen to him or take breath, 'and not a mere youngster neither, but a whole captain—Captain Denis, at your service, and to think after that that I'm going to be humbugged by you. I'll—'

A prolonged whistle from Jim, and the very peculiar look that came over his face arrested Susan at the very beginning of the threat she was about to utter.

'Captain Denis!' repeated Jim. 'Captain Denis! so you've took up with he. Well,

you've set your neck a good foot farther into the hangman's noose than it was afore —ha—ha—ha!'

'Do you know him, Jim?'

'Can't say I does—can't say I doesn't,' said Jim guardedly; 'we ain't pals, if that's what you mean, 'cos he's a gentleman, you see; but small folk in general knows more about big folk's business than they does themselves.'

'Have you ever spoken to him?'

'In the way of business—yes.'

'And whatever has he got to do with the hangman?'

'He may be first cousin to him for anythink as I know to the contrairy, but he's a gentleman, Sue; you can't hurt in taking up with a gentleman.'

And Jim chuckled over the idea that, by fostering a liking for Denis, he might get rid of Susan's persistent attachment for himself without throwing her into an acquaintance who would be dangerous, if in some unguarded or vindictive moment she should tell all she knew about the abduction and concealment of little Dandy.

Jim was beginning to be afraid that the mere chink of coin was not sufficient to silence Susan's tongue, and this sudden fancy of hers for Captain Denis was, he felt, the most opportune thing that could possibly have happened. How like is the great drama of life to a puzzle into which all the smallest, most jagged, crooked bits must fit, or the *dénouement*, whether it be good or evil, will utterly fail in completeness.

Jagged and crooked in the extreme was this episode which brought Susan Ford and Captain Denis together. Yet it had an important bearing on the issue of events. Had Susan's new admirer been any other man, Jim Burritt would probably have delayed, if he had not altogether put off his marriage with Mercy, from sheer fear lest Susan in her desperation should put into execution her threat about 'blabbing on the whole concern to spite him.' He knew full well that there was a sufficient amount of reckless devilry in her nature for her to take no account of how much her own danger was linked with his, if the whim seized her to revenge herself on his neglect of her. But

with Denis the case was quite different, and it suited his purpose in every way to encourage it. Susan, however, though she was secretly flattered at being admired by this captain, was by no means satisfied in not having aroused Jim's jealousy, and the news of his intended marriage with Mercy angered her not a little, notwithstanding the satisfaction she felt over the new lover she had annexed.

'You are a bad, deceitful man,' she said, raising her voice as though wishing the tones of it to penetrate into the Jennetts' abode. 'You promise all sorts of things when you want something done, and then when you've got it, you hand me over to the first man that offers. You—'

But Jim chucked her under the chin.

'Don't talk nonsense, little duchess, you've got the best of it this time, only think of this yere Captain Denis being a real gentleman. Why, if he marries you, and you're clever enough to make him, why, you'll have your revenge on Mercy right away.'

Jim Burritt, after a crude fashion, was decidedly a diplomat, and, moreover, a keen

observer of foibles. Susan's was vanity, and he played upon it vigorously and successfully. She tossed her head and smiled as she took in the idea he suggested. It evidently tickled her, and she said half to herself,—

'If I thought he'd make a lady of me.'

'You're fit for one, pretty Sue,' put in Jim insinuatingly; 'but I can't stop talking here no longer. I've got a business appointment down Shoreditch way, and it's getting late.'

He thought it wiser to make off before Susan broke into another paroxysm of fury, which, he made no doubt, she would do as soon as the dream in which he had suggested to her the position of Denis' wife had faded.

He was right. Scarcely had he turned the corner at the bottom of the street than her wrath and jealousy re-awakened, and she flew after him. But she was too late. It was already dark, and the thoroughfares were crowded; she could see nothing of him, and after walking up one street and down another for nearly half-an-hour in

a state of excitement, which grew more and more rampant as the chance of again meeting Jim became less, she found herself a long way from Smith Street, down somewhere in the purlieus of St James'.

A hand was suddenly laid on her shoulder, and a voice, which did not seem wholly strange to her, exclaimed,—

'My lucky star must be in the ascendant, since it shines on two meetings with you in one day.'

The speaker was Captain Denis, and the anger against Jim died out of Susan's heart as she turned and looked the captain in the face.

CHAPTER III.

KEEPING GUARD.

THE singing lessons in Cobbold Place took place, if not three times, at least twice in every week, increasing in severity as the intense warmth of Guiseppe's love for Venetia strengthened. She did not seem to mind his almost brutal sternness while he taught her, which was in such striking contrast with the demonstrative nature of the half-hour's love-making that invariably succeeded the lesson. Venetia was learning rapidly to love the little tenor, and loving she did not fear him, while her love made her take the utmost pains to please him, and caused her to receive his instructions

with an amount of attention he rarely obtained from his other pupils.

Of course he was flattered, and never ceased recapitulating that—

'*Cette chère* Venetia was the most adorable little blonde-haired beauty Europe had ever produced, Inglese too. Was she Inglese, thoroughly Inglese?' that was what Guiseppe utterly doubted; 'she was far too *simpatica*,' he said.

Now the little sneer he invariably cast on her country was the only thing about Guiseppe at which Venetia took umbrage. Till then she had thought all foreigners detestable; it was a sort of creed which her essentially English bringing up had forced upon her almost intuitively, and she imagined she was making an immense inroad on her national prejudices in allowing herself to love an Italian.

For that she did love him there was little doubt, truly and devotedly loved him with that sort of calm enduring love which burns on for ay with an unflinching light; yet it had none of the fitful bursts of passionate tenderness which made Gui-

seppe's ardent flame so much more luminous in appearance. Italian and hot in temperament though he was, he had sufficient penetration to note the patient affection which existed for him so enduringly, and being sensible of its existence, he appreciated it in full measure.

Thus the knowledge of a reciprocal tender feeling dwelt with them both, though as yet it was unproclaimed by the girl, even unconfessed, because both Guiseppe and Venetia knew full well that Mrs Armfield's disapproval stood between them like a wall.

Basil guessed how matters were going, and guessing, scarcely encouraged, though he took no active measures either way. He was fond of Guiseppe Belsospiro; his large-heartedness and *bonhomie* were very sympathetic to Basil; but at the same time he scarcely considered a marriage with this little fat eccentric-looking singing-master exactly the sort of alliance Venetia ought to contract. He himself aspired very high, and supposing—of course he dared not hope such an event would ever occur, but just for

the sake of argument—supposing he eventually married Lady George, it would be scarcely fitting that Belsospiro should be her brother-in-law.

Far was it from Basil to engage his mind in the weaving of plots and cabals. He was of far too honest a nature; still he could not help dwelling thoughtfully on any matter in which Lady George was concerned. Altogether Basil was placed in a very difficult position. He neither wished, nor could he exactly afford, to quarrel with Belsospiro at this juncture, and yet the greater friends they remained, the more he feared the cords which bound him to Venetia would be tightened; *attendre les évenements*, as the French say, was, however, the only line of policy—think the matter over as he would—that he decided it would be wise to follow, and Venetia and Guiseppe both often wondered in turn how it was that Basil was so indifferent or so blind.

Mrs Armfield had gone out to chat away the afternoon—a favourite relaxation in which she occasionally indulged, at the houses of her most intimate friends; invariably treating

them all to high panegyrics of Basil, which if they conferred small pleasure upon the more or less courteous listeners to whom she held forth, were at any rate highly gratifying to her one-sided maternal heart.

What could her friends say?

'No, Mrs Armfield, your son is not an Apollo, a demi-god, or a Crichton, and you can't imagine what a stupid old woman we think you for ramming him down our throats as such.'

Why, of course they could do nothing of the kind, but only imitate the parrot which this foolish mother did *not* resemble and—think the more.

The worst of idols is that they always have required and always will require victims. Not, mind, by any fault of theirs, for how could the marble and granite deities of old have any moral faults? but it is their very nature as idols. The origin of all idolatry lies not in the idol but in the idolator. Had Basil never been born, I firmly believe that Venetia would have enjoyed the pedestal on which he had been brought up; adulation, victims, halo and all.

She would have been *wanted* as an idol, and Mrs Armfield, who, as you have seen, was very far from a clever woman, would—with that ability which, oddly as it may sound, is always greater in proportion as its possessor lacks cleverness, have discovered qualities in her becoming to an idol. As things were, on the contrary, the girl being wanted for the very different character of sacrificial victim, her mother could only detect in her such lamb-like, dove-like, and innocent, but generally inefficient, endowments as suited the part.

Accordingly it was Mrs Armfield's habit to speak almost disparagingly of her daughter, implying that she belonged to the 'poor dear girl' order, and was fit for little more than to minister as second high priest at the shrine of St Basil.

If any of those who only judged of Venetia from Mrs Armfield's conversation could have peeped into the drawing-room in Cobbold Place during the mother's absence, seen the little foreigner's impassioned glances, and heard the rich deep tones of the girl's voice as they were brought out to the fullest

under Guiseppe's able tuition, they must have decided that there was very little justice in the view that Venetia was only fit to darn, sew and dust.

But Mrs Armfield was safe on her rounds; no visitors were ever admitted during practice time, and Venetia's voice welled forth trillingly with no listener save the adorer himself, and Susan Ford, who was sufficiently appreciative to enjoy the music as she heard it through walls and closed doors. At length to Venetia's ears came the ever welcome,—

'Basta! Enough for this to-day, Carissima Signorina! My ears languish me now for the sweeter music of which you are sole author, the music of your speaking words.

'Do you like it?' she asked with a pleased smile that was almost roguish for so simple a maiden.

'I am sure that is a music no one would care to write down. They could not!'

'Not put down what I say?'

'Oh yes, but then it would no longer be music—though still poetry—yes.'

'I did not know I spoke poems—I mean

of course I know I do not speak verse or rhyme, but—well I can't think there can be really anything poetic about my sentences—my words!'

'To me—there is.'

Venetia went on.

'Here, in England, we are fond of making out that foreigners are apt to be complimentary and insincere. Oh! dear Maestro, I have no such idea about you, and that is just why your saying that—that I am a sort of unconscious poet, surprises me so much.'

He opened his lips to speak, checked himself, and went and gazed into the street. Venetia blushed, though he could not see her, and felt sweetly flurried and nervous, but when, in a moment, he turned round, he only said,—

'I shall surprise you more yet, but not to-day; to-day it must not.'

At this precise moment Basil came in, and, with something very like a frown on his usually open, pleasant face, he threw himself into an arm-chair and asked a little testily where his mother was. Perhaps it

occurred to Basil that in good society girls are not usually left to take their singing lessons without a chaperone, and, without interfering farther on the subject of Venetia's love affair, he intended to state this fact quietly, but suggestively, to Mrs Armfield.

His arrival having broken up the *tête-à-tête*, Guiseppe came forward with his usual somewhat gushing effusiveness, and, perching his little fat person on a table close to Basil's chair, began to ask him what was the latest news of Denis; but Basil shrugged his shoulders and elevated his eyebrows without speaking. Captain Denis' stratagems entirely baffled him, and though he did not believe in him as a straightforward member of society, still he was almost beginning to think that, after all, he might have had nothing to do with the abduction of little Dandy. Certainly Basil looked very much worried, and, crossing his legs, he said rather testily,—

'The devil himself knows how the business will end; I wish to goodness I had never had anything to do with it!'

Guiseppe slapped him cordially on the

back—'Allons mon garçon—courage. We are not such imbeciles that we cannot bouleverser this coquin Denis.'

'I believe we are on the wrong track altogether. I don't fancy Denis is the right man.'

'Not the right man? Je jurerais sur mon honneur que lui il est thief et trois fois sacré blackguard,' cried Guiseppe, getting excited, as he always did over Captain Denis' shortcomings, and using in his excitement a sort of polyglot tongue.

'He is either a very deep blackguard, or not one at all,' observed Basil. 'I own that.'

But Guiseppe, too excited to let Basil speak, went on,—

'Triple coquin, vaurien, mon cher Basil—tu es enfant if you think this man is honest. Il est—'

At this moment Susan Ford, who occasionally answered the door when working in Cobbold Place, came in with a card and gave it to Basil—

'Mr JAMES GREEN.'

'Ask the gentleman to come in,' he said very quietly.

While she went to do his bidding, he informed his companions who the visitor was, and requested Venetia to go and wait about the stairs and passages, in order to ensure there being no listeners to any conversation that might take place.

Mr James Green, as he is ushered in by Susan Ford, looks a very benign middle-aged well-to-do gentleman of the city type. There is nothing seedy or detective-looking about his appearance, and as he shakes hands cordially with Basil, and bows on presentation to Guiseppe, it never occurs to Miss Susan Ford that he is other than an old family friend. When, however, the door is closed, and he is left alone with the two men, his manner changes as by magic. With his little keen eyes fastened on Guiseppe's face, he seems to be reading him through and through, and the perusal is evidently satisfactory, for, without speaking, he reopens the drawing-room door and looks out.

'It is all right,' Basil observes; 'my sister is on the watch. You can speak out.'

'Who is that young person who opened the door?'

'Her name is Susan Ford; she is a girl who comes to do needlework.'

Mr James Green consulted some notes he took from his pocket.

'Exactly, Susan Ford. She lives—Vale Street. Her mother keeps a lodging-house for the poorer classes. Occasionally she takes a walk in the evening with Captain Denis, and last evening she and another girl dined with him and a rich bill-discounter of the name of Stergold at some rooms the latter has in Down Street, Piccadilly.'

Mr James Green communicated these facts in a sort of dead-level tone, which served, however, to electrify both his hearers.

'Impossible,' said Basil; 'that girl! I must tell Venetia not to employ her any more. Why, we have got the wolf in our own sheepfold.'

'And for a time you must keep it here,' said the detective very pointedly; 'on no account discharge this Susan Ford, but watch her keenly. If there is anything to be found out about this Denis, it is through her that it will be discovered. For the moment I am baffled. From seeing the Captain about the

low neighbourhood in which the Fords live, I imagined I had a clue; the pursuit of this girl I now think is his only object; however, there is no saying what may turn up, we must watch and be silent.'

'My sister is perfectly reliable; she must look after Susan Ford,' said Basil.

'I should like to see the young lady presently before I go,' went on Mr Green in his methodical take-things-bit-by-bit fashion; 'in the meantime,' turning to the singer, 'your name is, I think, Belsospiro? You live in Smith Street, where you are known as the Sennoor?'

'Yes, yes; that is so.'

'I did not engage you to play detective on my good friend Signor Belsospiro,' observed Basil, laughing.

'You shall have my reasons immediately. It is necessary that the 'Sennoor' should keep his eyes open in Smith Street, quite as wide as you and your sister must do here.'

'They are good people there,' put in Guiseppe; 'the little tailor and his niece or daughter, or what it is, Mercy, is good girl.'

'They bear excellent characters both of them, but Miss Mercy, like the rest of the girls, is keeping company.'

'I know, I know!' exclaimed Guiseppe. 'I have seen a tall young artisan.'

'Jim Burritt,' went on Mr Green, once more consulting his notes. 'This same Jim Burritt is pretty intimate at Fords, and on Tuesday at midnight he met the captain at a small tavern in Wenlock Street at the back of St Giles' Church, and went home to his lodgings considerably the worse for liquor. Yesterday afternoon he met the captain again at the same place—that is in the street outside the tavern—but it was impossible to get near enough to hear what they said, specially as the captain is always looking about him as though he suspected some one was on his track.'

'*Sacré nom, mais c'est étonnant,*' cried Guiseppe, 'we are in the true middle of a *belle intrigue.* We shall find ourselves overcome by this people.'

'Scarcely,' answered Mr Green with a sort of grim smile. 'I do not think there is any danger of that sort to be anticipated;

at the same time I very much doubt if we are not attaching too much importance to this Captain Denis, who is perhaps only amusing himself after all with some low love affair.'

'He is vaurien—trois fois vaurien,' cried Guiseppe; 'have I not prove that he is the betrayer of Bettina? A man who will do that will—'

'Not necessarily steal a child,' said Mr Green; 'if men are to be judged by their amours, there are very few of them that would not count as blackguards. Can either of you gentlemen give me the motives which would induce Captain Denis to carry off this little boy?'

'There are strong ones,' exclaimed Basil. 'In the first place, Captain Denis is very much in love with, or at least very anxious to marry Lady George Heriot, the child's mother, and perhaps a still stronger motive I have learned from an interview I had with Lady George's lawyer to-day. Lord George had such confidence in, or I should almost say infatuation for Denis, that he not only left him trustee for the property,

but in the event of anything happening to his son, the whole of the money reverts to Denis after the death of Lady George.'

A little murmur as of disapproval mixed with astonishment fell from the lips of both Basil's hearers, the little Italian remarking,—

'You have droll plan to arrange the money in your England.'

'This strengthens the case considerably against Denis, there is no doubt,' remarked Mr Green, after a moment or two evidently passed in serious consideration; 'still, sir, we have yet nothing but the evidence of our own feelings against this man, and according to my experience it is evidence of a very deceptive nature. We should never allow ourselves to be guided by instincts and private opinions in cases of this description, but must stick to hard facts. Now, hard facts do not point to anything we can take hold of against Denis, unmitigated blackguard though we all know him to be. He may have nothing whatever to do with the abduction of this child.'

Guiseppe grew very excited and began to jabber Italian very rapidly.

'Mark you,' went on the detective, noting his irritation, 'I do not say relax for a moment the surveillance under which we have thought it judicious to place Captain Denis, but neither let us bestow all our attention on him. The butler or the nurse, or even one of the other servants may have some object in—'

But a fierce 'pshaw' from Basil arrested the completion of his sentence, and for a moment they stood looking at each other a little angrily.

Mr Green's mind, from his calling, was naturally open to every kind of suspicion, added to which he could not wholly forget that in certain quarters the idea was rife that Basil himself knew more than he chose to say of Dandy's whereabouts. Green's own instincts did not tend towards suspecting this young man, still as he had just said, he never allowed himself to be guided by them in the teeth of evidence, and consequently he resolved that, being very desirous to unravel the mystery of this case, he would secretly subject Mr Basil Armfield to as close watching as that inflicted

on his rival Denis. For James Green, with his keen penetration, knew full well that these two men were bitter rivals, being both in love with Lady George.

He took up his hat, which he had placed on the table while reading his notes, and saying,—

'Well, time is money, gentlemen; if you hear anything fresh, perhaps you'll kindly look in in Branch Place;' he turned to depart.

Something in his look annoyed Basil, and after he had let him out at the street door and come back once more into the drawing-room, he said to Guiseppe,—

'I wish to goodness we could find poor Dandy without the intervention of that man. A kind of shudder appears to run through me whenever I see him.'

CHAPTER IV.

A TWIST IN HIS TEMPER.

JOB JENNETT is sitting in the shop working, that is, he is pretending to work, for the worthy little man seems out of spirits, and the pauses between the stitches are somewhat long. The Amazon still sits in the window, which she darkens considerably by her imposing presence; but she has served as a good advertisement, and trade has certainly been brisker in Smith Street since she smiled on the passers by. For all that, honest Job is perplexed in his mind, and numerous as are the half-made garments, the patchings and mendings that lie around him, he does not seem to have the heart to set steadily to work.

He has a short pipe in his mouth, from which he occasionally whiffs a little curl of smoke; then he heaves a deep sigh, stitches for a minute or two assiduously at his coat seam, whiffs again, sighs again, and so on during at least half-an-hour.

Meanwhile, though the door of communication with the parlour is closed, Mercy may be heard singing like a bird.

It has always delighted Job to hear Mercy sing, but somehow the joyous strains give him no pleasure on that especial morning, and yet they have been silent for a good many previous weeks too.

'It is the law of nature, I suppose,' says Job at last, getting up from his seat to fetch something from the other side of the counter; 'the law of nature, as learned folk would explain, that she should be glad to leave the old father's roof for a husband's; but it is hard, devilish hard, and me as would work for her night and day. If Jim wasn't such a ne'er-do-weel I shouldn't mind so much; but there, she loves him, and he's got a bit of money. What's the good of me slavin' and speculatin' in that there ridin' lady if it wasn't for her?

She don't want nothin' from me now,' and doubling up his arms he laid them on some stuffs which happened to be before him, and looked for a second or two the picture of despairing idleness. Then a new light broke on him; he drew a vigorous whiff from his pipe, and said rather savagely, 'She will want summat though. Lor' bless ye, Jim's money won't last no time, and then she'll be glad enough of shelter with old Job.'

Having arrived at this conclusion, he emptied his pipe, of what little tobacco still remained, into the fireplace, and went as vigorously to work as he used to do in the days when the future was undimmed by care, hardly looking up till his attention was aroused by the ringing of the shop bell as the door opened.

It was Jim, and he wore the grey suit which he had ordered from old Job as soon as he had squared matters with Mercy.

Job gave him a nod which was intimate but not friendly.

'Is the lass within?' the young man asked very tersely. He knew full well

that Job neither believed in nor respected him.

The answer was a short 'Ay.'

And without farther talk Jim went into the inner room, where Mercy was very busily engaged finishing her wedding-dress. It was not often that she passed her time in needlework beyond mendings—keeping principally to her trade of ironing; but it was impossible to ask Susan, who usually made her dresses, to have anything to do with this one, so she made up her mind to do it herself.

It was a dark blue cachemire, made very simply, its only trimming being bands of satin round the neck and cuffs. Just the sort of dress a simple-minded girl like Mercy Jennett would select; but which would scarcely have pleased any of the flaunting misses who, living in the adjoining houses, aired their cheap dirty finery up and down Smith Street.

Mercy held up the frock as Jim entered, of course expecting admiration of her work, and she received it in a kind which she did not perhaps altogether expect, for he took

her and the garment both in his arms and kissed her noisily.

They both seemed to be in the best of spirits; it was only the little tailor in the front shop on whom the shadow of misgiving had descended like a cloud. Yet Mercy had doubted Jim.

True, but she had forgotten all about that long ago. He did not love Susan, of that she felt very sure, and he had given up the public to please her. What more could she fear?

The look of him, to other eyes but loving ones, might at that moment have answered the question; for Jim, though certainly not intoxicated, had nevertheless been drinking, and it was not yet twelve o'clock in the day. If Mercy had contradicted him in the very least, he would have quarrelled with her, but Mercy was in no mood for contradiction — everything at that moment seemed roseate in hue, so she gave him no chance of exhibiting his weakness.

As soon as she could escape from Jim's embrace she uncovered a mysterious little box that stood on a side table, and showed

him a brooch and a pair of earrings in filigree silver.

'There,' she said, 'don't say as I hav'n't had a wedding present—that's from the Sennoor.'

Jim looked at the gewgaws for a second, then he looked at Mercy.

'You don't go philandering with that there dirty Italian do ye, Mercy?'

'Jim!'

'Well, it's all right as long as he keeps his distance; he may give you a brooch a day, and welcome; but if I thought as there was any familiarities I'd break every bone inside his fat skin.'

'Oh, you dear old jealous Jim,' and she kissed him, this time of her own accord; 'why, the Sennoor is quite a gentleman. He don't trouble hisself about girls like me.'

She covered up the ornaments though, and pushed them on one side, and, moreover, she did not wear them at her wedding, which she had fully intended to do.

'You'll come out with me a bit, eh, Mercy?'

'What, at this time of the day? Oh, Jim, I have got such lots to do.'

'Ain't it holiday time, and we going to be married on Saturday?'

'What is it you want with me out this morning, Jim?'

'Don't you ask no questions, but get your hat and come along. It is a surprise.'

'And daddy's dinner?' asked Mercy; 'who's to give daddy his dinner if I go out with you?'

'Who'll give it to him when you are married?'

'Poor daddy!' and Mercy looked momentarily sorrowful; then she went on, 'Look here, Jim, you stop and have a bit with us, and then as soon as I've cleared up I'll come with you for a walk. The dinner's just ready; there's a rare basin of good soup.'

She took the lid off the saucepan that stood by the fire as she spoke, and the appetising smell of the leeks, with which the soup was strongly flavoured, made Jim at once accede to her request. In fact, so amiable was he that he assisted her to get the table ready and make everything quite comfortable before Job should be called in.

If, however, Jim was amiable, most certainly Job was not. He looked the very picture of grimness as he sat there in his shirt sleeves, ladling the soup down his throat noisily and rapidly in large spoonfuls, while to each of Jim's peaceful overtures he answered with a grunt.

He had given a hardly-wrung consent to this marriage, and intended to be present at it; that was all that Jim surely ought to expect from him!

Mercy looked from one to the other of them helplessly. To her they were the two dearest beings on earth; if they would only learn to like each other just a little bit, she thought, how happy it would make her. Mercy had yet to learn what jealousy strengthened by disbelief will effect.

But too glad then was she to bring the frugal dinner—the soup being only followed by bread and cheese—to a conclusion, and as she saw Jim put his last hunk of bread into his mouth and swallow his last tumbler of beer, she jumped up to clear away, while Job, without vouchsafing a word, returned to his work in the shop.

'Daddy's got a twist in his temper to-day,' said the young man, laughing.

'Oh, he's only a bit worried with o'er much work,' she answered apologetically; 'the riding woman in the window has brought it, and no mistake.'

Jim set up a loud shout.

'Darned if ever I know'd a madder thing of Job than to bring she.'

'A wise thing you mean, Jim; but never mind daddy's affairs just now. Help me to carry some of these things into the kitchen, and then we'll go out at once.'

Ten minutes later they were walking briskly down the street together arm in arm, Mercy looking up every now and then with proud loving glances into Jim's face, and thinking how well and handsome he looked in that grey suit, which, after all, suited him better than a workman's garb.

Whither he was taking her, Mercy did not in the least know; but she felt perfectly happy as she tramped along Oxford Street on Jim's arm. It was the first time she had been out with him in the day time, and she

felt as if every one she met must be looking at them and envying her happiness.

Crossing over the road when they got to Holborn, they were stopped by a carriage.

'That's Lady George Heriot!' exclaimed Mercy; 'her as I do ironing for.'

'You won't do no more,' put in Jim decidedly; 'yer ain't going to work when you're married.'

'Poor lady! She's lost her little boy; it's very sad.'

Jim laughed.

'And you think as she can't wear no weepers unless you starch them. She'll get round without the consolation of your ironin', never fear.'

'Law, Jim, you do put things that queer;' and taken up with Jim's way of putting things, she omitted to tell him the story of Lady George's little boy. Perhaps she thought he had heard it.

A few minutes later they turned down a side street, and Jim gave an exclamation of 'There!' as he stopped at a small tobacconist's shop.

'Whoever lives here?' asked Mercy.

For answer he pushed open the door and went in.

'Good morning, Mr Burritt,' said a sickly, shrivelled old woman, who sat behind the counter.

'Good morning, Mrs Waggs. I've brought my missis, as is to be next Saturday, to see the place.'

'Walk in, miss; it's all ready for you. I'm only holding on for a day or two to suit your convenience;' and Mrs Waggs with some difficulty got down from a high stool on which she was perched, and preceded the couple into the parlour.

'It's them rheumatics, you see, as has made me give up the business. I am getting old, you know. You'll have 'em when you're my age. Waggs had 'em, and died along of 'em. It's dampish at the back. If I was you I'd have the drains seen to; but there, I've got my money. Mr Burritt's paid like a gentleman, and it ain't my affair to meddle. Have a drop of summat short, just for luck like, and to conclude the bargain.'

Mercy shook her head, but did not attempt to speak. How could she get a word in? for the garrulous old dame went on uninterruptedly, and never waited for an answer; besides, Mercy was so utterly bewildered she could not understand what any of it meant.

She soon found out, though, that Jim had bought the goodwill and fixtures, and taken a lease of the premises. It was not a business Mercy cared for.

'It led to drink if it wasn't it,' she said to herself; 'but there, Jim had given up the public to please her, so she mustn't contradict him.'

There was a good deal of crude philosophy about Mercy in her way, and it taught her to accept the inevitable with a good grace. She was very civil to old Mrs Waggs, though she firmly believed her to be a drunken old humbug; but then she was not going to stop, so it did not matter much to Mercy, and of course she and Jim would conduct the business on different principles. Naturally she did not think all this out at the moment, but such was

the upshot of her meditations when she got back to Job's back parlour.

She went all over the house, into every hole and corner, giving her opinion about papering here and painting there, however, and making plans for taking lodgers, which Mrs Waggs had been too infirm to do. Yes—Mercy must have loved Jim Burritt very much, or in making these arrangements for her own new home, she would have thought more of poor old Job and the Sennoor, left to the tender mercies of a woman in the neighbourhood, who was to come in every day and do for them, for Mercy was no heartless, unfeeling girl. When she did give them a thought, it always resolved itself into a promise that she would go round most days and clear up a bit.

So it was all finally settled. The little business was actually bought, and on Saturday next, after the wedding, they were to take possession of their new home.

'And sure*ly* Job will be pleased,' Jim said, while they were walking back to Smith Street.

But Job was not pleased; everything connected with the subject failed to please him. He would rather have seen Mercy in her grave than Jim Burritt's wife; and yet he did not feel as if he had any power to prevent it.

'She will be miserable with him — she will be miserable without him,' was the conclusion he arrived at. Herein lay Job's difficulty, and being a tender-hearted man he did not know how to solve it, so he let things drift, never doubting, however, that they would drift to a bad end.

Such being his sentiments, nothing with which Jim Burritt was in any way connected was likely to give him satisfaction.

He went to the wedding when the day came, kissed Mercy affectionately when the ceremony was over, behaved with due and sober decorum at the dinner in the little back parlour in Smith Street, to which a few friends had been invited, never, however, allowing his spirits to rise to that pitch of exhilaration to which Job's spirits had sometimes been known to attain.

The only little outbreak of pleasure that

illumined his face was when the Sennoor came in to drink the bride's health, and with the characteristic courtesy of his nation, said,—

'May te heart—coming a—voti—desire—a *wishes* of a stranger-friend from te glowing sky south, bring from heaven and from all te outside world propizzie, sunbeams upon our—these dear loving new spouses!'

CHAPTER V.

TRUST ME.

IT is Sunday.

Lady George lying on the sofa in her bedroom, looks the picture of desolation. She has not been to church. Naturally a religious woman, who never till now has willingly neglected any of her duties, she feels almost inclined to quarrel with Heaven for Dandy's disappearance, and resigns herself to a sort of mute despair. Ever since Basil Armfield and Captain Denis left her after her refusal to sign the papers on Friday evening, she had remained shut up in her own room, and had seen no one except her sister-in-law, Lady Craigietoun, for whom of course the rigour of the *consigne* had been relaxed.

Lady Craigietoun had come in after church, and had sat with Lady George for half-an-hour, trying vainly to persuade her to come and drive with her in the Victoria that afternoon. While they were still discussing the question, the maid came in with a note, and Lady Craigietoun could not fail to observe the crimson colour that rose momentarily to Lady George's pale cheeks as she read it. It was from Basil, asking for an interview. She tore off the back of the paper, and simply writing 'at four o'clock,' she desired the maid to give it to the bearer, who was of course Mr Armfield himself.

'No, she would not drive, she positively could not,' she said, going back into her conversation with Lady Craigietoun, with a sort of effort, and making no remark about the interruption.

'Do you mean that you are going to pass the rest of the day in this room? My dear Julia, it is quite wicked.'

'I did not say I would not go out of the room, I only said I would not go out of the house. Please, dear Margaret, do leave me alone. If you had lost a dear and only child,

as I have, you would not care much for any of the pleasures that this world can offer.'

'But he is not dead. He will be found again in a few days. When my darling little Maggie died, you and Craigietoun took me about, and made me do everything I could to forget her.'

'Do you not remember how King David got up and washed his face and broke his fast when he heard his son was dead—better, fifty times better, for Dandy to be in his grave than—' she burst out crying. 'Oh, if I only knew what he is suffering and where he is!'

Lady Craigietoun kissed her and offered no farther remark. She was an elegant, well-dressed, well-mannered woman of the world, celebrated for her ready answers and *bon mots* in the high society in which she moved; yet she found it a little difficult and out of her line to put in just the sympathising word which was as balm in sorrow. She was truly grieved about her sister-in-law's trouble, but it took the form of feeling irritated that it should have happened, and she was more ready to punish the abductors of little Dandy

than to condole with his mother who had lost him.

'I must go home to luncheon, or Craigietoun will be waiting,' she said, getting up. 'Shall I look in again later?'

'Not to-day, I think, dear Margaret. To-morrow I shall be very pleased to see you at any hour you like.'

Lady Craigietoun went down stairs, repeating to herself,—'She has got an appointment with that what is his name, Armley or Armfield—no doubt of the matter. If she were a married woman it would not signify; but a widow, and with her strong sentiments about right and wrong, she will be marrying him, and I believe his people are horrid—I must speak to Craigietoun about it.'

Lady Craigietoun was always going to speak to her husband about the various *contretemps* and difficulties she met with in life; but she generally ended by acting according to her own impulses without consulting him.

She would have liked above everything to find out what Lady George was really going to do that afternoon, but she did not feel that she dared go back to Chapel Street

after the strong hint she had received to absent herself. So she determined to get rid of some of the annoyance it had occasioned her by bringing the subject before his lordship's notice at luncheon and advising him to look after his late brother's wife, who was being fooled by a young adventurer who, in her opinion and that of Captain Denis, was probably himself the abductor of little Dandy. Lord Craigietoun had never seen Basil Armfield, and knew nothing about his character or proclivities; but from his wife's opinion, backed by that of Denis the family friend, he at once marked Basil 'Dangerous' in his mind, and resolved to keep the matter in view.

Meanwhile, as soon as Lady Craigietoun had taken her departure, Lady George rang for her maid and desired her to come and do her hair and dress her. The maid was rather sulky, from the fact that the hall dinner bell had just rung, but Lady George, usually a considerate mistress, had become utterly selfish since Dandy's disappearance.

As the servants observed,—

'It would be a mercy to find the child

if it was only to make her la'ship bearable!'

It was half-past two before Lady George was dressed, and then she ordered some luncheon to be brought her on a tray in the boudoir, and no visitors to be admitted on any plea whatever, except Mr Armfield, who was coming on business.

'Business — pretty business,' mentally ejaculated the Abigail as she gave a final flounce out of the room, 'howsomever, if he puts my lady in a good humour I've no cause to grumble. They may spoon till all's blue.'

At four o'clock to the minute Basil arrived, to find Lady George awaiting him in her accustomed corner of the sofa by the fire.

She held out her hand to him, just the faintest pink passing slowly over her white face as she did so.

'Are you better?' he asked, keeping it for a moment in his, as he looked into her face inquiringly. 'I was so sorry yesterday to hear that you were too ill to see any one.'

'I can never be better,' she said, 'until—

but I have made an effort to come down to you.'

'Thank you, thank you so very much, I have not seen you since Friday afternoon, and I wanted to thank you for your ready acceptance of my hint.'

'And I too wish to know what that hint meant?'

'That, dear Lady George, I am afraid I cannot tell you. All I can do is to ask you to trust me and sign no papers which Denis may bring you, at all events till we have found some traces of little Dandy.'

'But why not? What can signing papers for Captain Denis have to do with my Dandy?'

'I have my doubts of every move he makes, more so than ever since I learnt from your lawyer yesterday that all the money in which Lord George left you a life interest reverts to him in the event of Dandy's death.'

'Mr Armfield!' and Lady George started so violently that she almost bounded from her seat; 'what can—what do you mean?'

'Nothing,' he answered, walking away, 'I am only telling you a fact.'

'Which I knew before, but it can have no bearing in the case. Captain Denis is a man I particularly dislike; but he is not—' she buried her face in her hands; 'what, what, would you have me think?'

'I do not wish you to think at all about the matter, only beware of Captain Denis—sign nothing, and trust me that I have a good reason for asking you to do this.'

'And Dandy, Mr Armfield, are there no traces of Dandy? If I threw myself on my knees to Henry Denis, implored him to give me back my boy, do you not think he would listen to me?'

'Heaven forbid that you should do such a thing. By allowing that you in the least suspect Denis of having any hand in this business you will naturally lessen the chance of finding your child. You must treat him as if you had the greatest confidence in him, even give him money if need be to assist in the search, only never really trust him for a single moment.'

'It is too dreadful, too horrible to think of,'

said Lady George, beginning to walk excitedly about the room. 'That I, who of all people, love a quiet monotonous life, should be forced against my will into playing a prominent part in a drama like this, is past all belief. Oh, Mr Armfield, if you have any regard for me, put an end to this anxiety.'

'I cannot. I wish to Heaven I could, but I will do my best—that you do not doubt?'

'No, no—only every one is doing their best, and no one seems to succeed. From you, too, I seem to expect more than from the rest.'

The colour mounted into Basil's face with the pleasure he felt at the implied preference.

'You will really trust me?' he said eagerly.

'Yes, though every one should tell me you are false.'

'Then, please come and sit down in your accustomed place and let me give you some of my thoughts about this business.'

She obeyed him, asking as she did so,—

'You really think that Henry Denis knows where Dandy is?'

'I do—but I am afraid to make any move

lest it should be a false one, and drive him to desperation. If we press him too hard he may leave England, and then our chance of finding Dandy will be lost. For the same reason it would be equally dangerous to have him arrested—in fact more so, for many people would regard him as a martyr, and imagine that I had instigated the proceedings out of spite.'

'But according to that nothing can be done?'

'Pardon me, it is better that you should not be acquainted with too many details; but there is not an hour in the twenty-four in which Denis is not watched.'

Lady George looked at him with wide open eyes, as though for the moment surprise was paramount over every other feeling. In the somewhat circumscribed sphere in which she had always moved, she had learnt nothing of the practical working of underhand plots and dark intrigues.

'What can I do but trust you?' she asked in a helpless, piteous tone. 'I do not understand all these manœuvres, yet I am giving you endless trouble.'

Basil took her hand, which she did not attempt to withdraw from him.

'Only let me see the worried look depart from your brow, the sad expression from your eyes, and I shall be perfectly happy.'

She smiled; perhaps she thought that Basil's wish was a moderate one, and she did not altogether believe that, having attained it, he would be content until he had followed it by another; but she said nothing, and Basil was too manly to urge his suit just now, when he felt she depended on him for assistance. He, however, kissed the hand he held, and a glow of warmth spread itself over his heart, for she did not snatch it away. The *tête-à-tête* dawdled on uninterrupted, one hour became two, and still they sat there; Lady George, in the society of this man, passing by far the happiest time she had spent since Dandy was taken away. They did not talk of their love for each other, though both felt it; but they conversed in a dreamy half-sentimental fashion of love in the abstract. How sacrifices are such a joy, and a delight, when made for a beloved being, that they positively became a selfish

pleasure; in fact the sort of sentimental argument in which they indulged was too over-sweetened to bear reproduction on paper, and they themselves would have been the first to laugh at it under other circumstances. But Lady George was under the influence of a strong depression,—Basil only too ready to follow her along whatever path it pleased her to select.

During their conversation the visitors' bell had frequently rung, but the orders about admitting no visitors had been so strict that Lady George feared no infringement of them. Soon after six o'clock, however, there was a quiet peal, followed by some talking in the hall; another second or two and the butler came into the room to inquire whether her ladyship would make an exception and see Captain Denis. Lady George looked very guilty as she started up angrily.

'No, Bennet, I told you I would see no one. Why do you not obey my orders? Tell Captain Denis that it is impossible for me to receive him now.'

The hall door closed with a slam, which made it tolerably evident that Captain Denis

had heard and intended to resent her refusal, and the butler returned with a note which Captain Denis had left in case he was unsuccessful in finding Lady George 'at home.' In it he asked her to fix a day and hour for signing the papers, which he said were most important, as there was certain property which could not be transferred to another mortgage without her signature.

Lady George's reply, sanctioned by Basil, was a significant one.

'DEAR CAPTAIN DENIS,—Half-an-hour after my Dandy returns to his home I will give the papers every consideration; till then I will affix my signature to nothing.—Yours truly, JULIA HERIOT.'

This note neither accused nor exonerated him; still it was sufficiently pointed for him to infer that she had a suspicion that he knew more about Dandy's disappearance than he chose to acknowledge.

If she could have witnessed his fury when the missive reached him, she would probably have quailed. Few people knew to what

fits of savage anger Denis occasionally gave way, because he was one of those men who had sufficient command over his vices to be able to conceal them more or less cleverly from the world. That Lady George's refusal to sign the papers had roused some of his worst passions there is little doubt, and if, by sending this note, she clung to a slender hope that her determination would induce him to send Dandy back, how miserably was she mistaken. Vengeance was as strong in Captain Denis' nature as though he had been Corsican bred, and he felt this was an insult, added on to a long list of slights, for which he was beholden to Lady George. Slights, by the way, that served to strengthen his love for her, and made him determine that he would oust every rival. Fortunately the butler, who liked Basil and hated Denis, had not told him that her ladyship had any visitors, or his rage would have been increased tenfold. He had spoiled their *tête-à-tête*, however, by the jar of his attempted intrusion, and, for that day at least, the sort of love-dream which enveloped them was dispelled.

Basil rose to take his leave with a firmer faith in Lady George's love than he had ever felt before, for though she had owned to no stronger feeling for him than friendship, yet did she not listen to his counsels, and had she not consented to trust him to the death?

CHAPTER VI.

BEN HALLER'S.

A TOP attic in a street not many hundred yards from St James' Street. It is crammed from ceiling to floor with a most heterogeneous mass of odds and ends, masculine, however, in gender. Hats, coats, and other portions of male attire are scattered pell-mell among books, pipes, papers, bottles, glasses, and countless other addenda, the whole being covered with such a thick coating of dust that it does not look as if a thrifty housewife were in the habit of visiting the room.

Not surprising that Captain Denis, late of Her Majesty's East Indian Cavalry, should not care to give his home address, but

tell his friends that he is always to be found at his club.

If untidy slatternly habits be a proof of an ill-regulated mind, then Captain Denis' mind is most ill-regulated, though in outward appearance when in public he is always spic and span, materially as well as morally. He hides his untidy, dirt-begrimed garret as he does his corrupted vice-stained actions behind a decent exterior, and poses before the world as a well-conditioned gentleman, who is probably a good deal better, but at least is no worse than his neighbours. Not by any means like the Captain Denis who sits in shirt sleeves in that attic, now unkempt, unshorn, a desperate and evil look upon his face, his elbows on the table, his chin resting on his hands, as he almost glares on some letters which are lying before him. Amongst those papers, too, there is a bundle of bank notes. Captain Denis' moodiness is not then the result of absolute impecuniosity, but may rather be ascribed to frustrated plans. Besides the money there is a short terse note from Lady George, which had enclosed fifty pounds, begging him to use it in the

search for Dandy : the money is welcome, but the treatment not exactly what he courts.

Lady George had but little belief in the money being spent for the purpose specified, but she had just the faintest hope that it might provide a few comforts for her darling boy, and, clinging to this idea, with Basil's consent she had sent it. Though Denis gloated over money, he felt scarcely as pleased as usual in the possession of this sum, because it was accompanied by the constant steady refusal to sign any papers for the present. Now, the document to which he wished her to affix her signature was neither more nor less than an instrument by which she made over to him, as trustee, certain property over which, by her husband's will, she had an absolute right and control, being able to leave it to whom she pleased, the rest going, as Basil had told Mr Green, in the event of Dandy's death, to Captain Denis. Denis had calculated on Lady George's want of business knowledge to imagine that he could extort this signature, and thus place the whole of her fortune under the same dependence on himself.

For the moment he was foiled, and, not seeing any means by which he could overcome the difficulty, he was proportionately angry. Fifty pounds, however, was worth having, he thought, as he scrambled the notes together and thrust them into a cash box, which he locked. Then he got up, dressed himself with that nicety and precision for which his toilette in public was renowned, and went out.

He would go and see Susan Ford and find out from her how things were working, and what they were doing with little Dandy. Acute though Susan was, she had never discovered that Denis was in any way interested in the secret business they had undertaken for some client of Jim's, and in her vanity imagined that her personal beauty alone attracted Captain Denis.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when Denis went out, much too early to go to the Fords, partly because he did not choose to be seen prowling about low precincts in the daylight, partly because Susan would probably be at work either at the Armfields or elsewhere. As he came out of

his lodgings, and was pulling the door to after him, his attention was attracted for a moment by a man with a grey beard standing on the opposite side of the street, as though waiting for some one. Denis looked at him very keenly, but he did not recognise him; so he passed on without giving the matter any farther consideration, beyond muttering to himself that he hated 'lurkers.'

He went into the club for his letters, stayed there about an hour reading them and answering one or two, then he went up into Piccadilly. The same grey bearded man was reading the news-headings of the various evening papers as they lay exposed at the top of some steps leading down to a newsmonger's shop. He bestowed a furtive look on Denis, and went on with his reading. They had evidently recognised each other. Denis paused, as though himself interested in the papers, and even went down the steps and expended a penny on a *Globe*. In reality he was taking stock of the man with the grey beard, posing for 'don't care' before him; not that he felt

particularly afraid with Lady George's fifty pounds locked away in his cash box, though he had a shrewd suspicion that this individual was probably some one to whom he owed money, or else the representative of such. He pocketed his *Globe*, cast another glance on the man, and then walked off at a brisk pace towards the circus. There he got into an omnibus. Denis never admitted that he was in the habit of indulging in this mode of conveyance, but his finances were generally so short that he often risked detection rather than take a cab. Opposite to him, in fact he got in at the same time as himself, there was a man whose face he seemed to recognise. Yet the man showed no sign of having any acquaintance with him. Denis never took his eyes off the stranger, but he meantime remained perfectly impassable, his chin leaning on his hands, which were crossed on the top of a cotton umbrella he carried. He was clean shaven, except a small grey moustache, and he wore round his neck a large blue handkerchief with white spots, and every now and then he coughed huskily.

'Who the deuce is he?' Denis repeatedly asked himself, but with no success.

They both got out in the Strand close to Waterloo Bridge, and Denis turned up the nearest street leading to Covent Garden. He turned to look for his omnibus companion, but he was nowhere to be seen, so he went on into the market, where he expended five shillings in flowers, desiring them to be sent to Lady George Heriot, and gave his card to accompany them. He passed up to the farther end of the market, crossed the road into King Street, where he stood looking for a second or two in a shop window. Again his attention was attracted by a passer-by.

'Why, this man must be the other fellow's son,' he said to himself; 'by Jove, has every one got the same face to-day, or am I becoming a nervous fool.'

The man who this time attracted Captain Denis' attention was about forty, perhaps less, with very light hair and an almost florid complexion, still he was so like his opposite neighbour in the omnibus, that the resemblance was quite absurd. The fair man

evidently saw Denis looking at him, for he smiled, and crossing the street walked slowly away on the opposite side, murmuring as he went along.

'He's a sharp 'un. It won't be easy to flummax him.'

The captain at the same time said to himself,—

'If I have not seen one man to-day in three different disguises, my name is not Henry Denis.'

Ay, and he would not see him again in a hurry either. It was a dodge, as Mr Green called it, to attract Denis' attention and wake matters up a bit.

'He will be sure to get frightened and go to his lair,' thought leery Green, 'and then we shall succeed in unearthing him and finding the child.'

So far he was right, Denis was alarmed, but he was not such a neophyte in intrigue as to run to earth quite so easily. The warning made him more circumspect, and he determined to act upon it. He went circuitously to the tavern in Wenlock Street, where, as Mr Green had told Basil, he had previously

met Jim Burritt; but on this part of his journey he was not followed by the indefatigable Green, who was afraid of awakening his suspicions too thoroughly, and who lately imagined he might find a clue to the missing boy by watching the house in which Guiseppe Belsospiro lodged in Smith Street. Since Jim Burritt had taken up with Mercy once again, he was so often there that Mr Green imagined she must know something of what was going on.

Arrived at the tavern or beer shop in question, Captain Denis could see nothing of him; he waited about for several minutes, then he looked inside. It was a squalid wretched place of the lowest order, even a respectable mechanic would have been ashamed to be seen there. The landlord shouted out to him in rough tones to inquire what he might be wanting. He was one of those men who hate the very sight of a gentleman, and prefer to grovel for aye among the lowest refuse of humanity. He had his excuse, since nature had certainly not been kind to him, and his appearance was in every way so repulsive, the odour of the place

so intolerable, that even Denis, accustomed as he was to the back stairs of life, fairly shuddered. But pulling himself together in a moment, he inquired if a man of the name of Burritt was there, as he wished to give him an order for some work. The landlord, who was a big man with a blotched face, on which the nose had been smashed flat in a fight, roared out in a fit of noisy laughter when he heard this question. He knew full well that work was not in Jim Burritt's line, and a 'nob' coming there under false pretences as he felt assured, was exactly the sort of thing to incite Ben Haller into a burst of savage, insolent hilarity.

'Look you here, master,' he said, 'don't never come to the "Pot and Kettle" if you want a feller to work, 'cos it ain't a likely place to find 'em. Joe Burritt wanted to work, ha, ha, ha! Look at he.'

And he pointed to a mass in the corner which might be a man, though it looked more like a heap of clothes. It was Jim Burritt, and dead drunk.

'Does this often happen?' asked Captain Denis, looking considerably annoyed.

'Well, Jim's fond of his liquor, he be, though he don't as a rule let folk know it, he don't. What's com'd over him to-day I can't say; shows my stuff is potent, don't it? He work! ha, ha, ha!'

Disgust of the very strongest was depicted on Captain Denis' face. A man who was capable of indulging in a large amount of strong liquor without showing any visible sign of his potations, Denis held in respect, he himself being wont to drink pretty freely; but to be overcome by drink so as to render himself intellectually useless. Faugh!

'Can't I serve your honour with a drop o' summat?' asked Ben Haller, with that sort of cringing manner which, like a street beggar's civility, points to the amount of insolence a refusal will call forth. Denis gave one more rapid glance round the stench laden room.

'Yes, a glass of brandy,' he said, feeling almost sick from the atmosphere. He drank it off at a gulp, tossed the landlord a silver coin, and with a curt 'Good morning,' and another sneer of disgust at Jim, he walked out of the 'Pot and Kettle,' without hearing the objurgations cast on him

and his class by that arch democrat, Mr Ben Haller. His own mental abuse of Jim was perhaps scarcely less strong, as he walked slowly along the streets, meditating over what he should do next, since he was beginning to think that Jim was not a particularly trustworthy coadjutor.

By this time it is getting dark, and Captain Denis takes a turn round the neighbourhood where Susan lives. He does not like to go straight to the house, for he still has the one face under three aspects vividly before his mind; and though his flirtation with Susan is a seemingly all-sufficient reason for his lurking in the vicinity of her home, yet the conscience that makes cowards of us all does not allow him to escape its influence. There is scarcely a creature about, however; the street in which the Fords live is short and but little frequented, and an old woman grovelling after cabbage leaves in the gutter is the only individual Denis sees. Moreover, he has observed her too frequently before to associate her with the detective force, so he goes boldly up to the Fords' door.

A one-eyed deaf old man, the front parlour lodger, answers the summons.

'Miss Ford in? I have a message for her.'

The old man only half-hearing the question, toddles to the back room and brings the mother, who seeing a gentleman, gives a jerk to a rusty black cap, with a bit of dirty red flower, which is perched at the top of her head, and sets it all awry, smudging her face in her excitement with her hand—she was in the act of cleaning pots—puts on her blandest manner and drops a curtsy.

Captain Denis is a little taken aback.

'You are—'

'Mrs Ford, at your service, sir.'

'Exactly. Some friends of mine want a young person to do some needle-work. I have recommended your daughter.'

'Much obliged, I am sure. Susan will be home directly. Won't you walk in?'

Denis followed Mrs Ford into the stuffy little room at the back, which served them for kitchen and parlour. He seated himself in the arm-chair she pushed for him

close to the fire, and sat for a minute or two contemplating the clock on the mantel-shelf, as though time was an intricate study he found it difficult to comprehend.

Mrs Ford, finding he was not inclined to be communicative, went on what she called 'clearing up'—an employment which never seemed to be wasted on the back parlour.

At last, after some meditation, Denis turned suddenly round and looked at her.

'You have a little boy hidden away in a garret upstairs,' he said.

A lot of kettles and iron utensils, among which Mrs Ford was busying herself, fell to the ground with a clatter.

Mrs Ford had never seen Captain Denis before, and a horrid vision of police flitted before her mind.

He noted her terror, smiled, and utilised it.

'You do not wish to get into difficulties, my good woman, of course?'

'Lor' bless you, sir, that I don't. I've always steered clear of trouble, and never had nout to do wi' courts and such like—always been respectable, in fact; but I was

a bit over persuaded of — it was Jim, as is so smooth-tongued like, and I'm that poor; besides, what's the harm? ses I— the sweet innocent! He's as well done by as if he was in a palace, so there ain't no crime, and he haven't no relations. Would yer honour like to see him?'

'No, Mrs Ford; indeed, I should not. I heard of this matter from Jim Burritt, and partly out of friendship for him, and partly out of a desire to do you a good action, I thought I would give you a word of warning about this business.'

'Then you ain't the police yourself— there ain't no police about—be there, sir?'

'I do not feel so sure of that.'

Mrs Ford's legs began to tremble, and she shook all over as if with the palsy.

'Don't be frightened, my good woman; I think I can help you. This little boy is shut up at the top of the house, I believe?'

'Yes, sir — that he be; and no mortal being has ever set eyes on he. How the police can know he is there I can't a-guess.'

'If they *knew* he was there you would

have had them inside your doors long ago, but they are on the watch.'

'Oh, Lord! whatever shall I do? Me, Sally Ford, in jail! Oh, I couldn't a-bear it. Whatever's Jim Burritt about that he don't come and settle matters instead of leaving me, a lone widder, to bear all the blame?'

'He is drunk and incapable,' said Denis sternly, 'so you had better trust to me.'

'And whatever am I to do?' and she began to cry, taking up the corner of her apron and smearing the tears in black patches all over her face.

'Be composed! look at the difficulty bravely, and act according to my directions. You must leave London for a little while, taking this boy with you.'

'And my house and my lodgers and our work—however shall I do that?'

'There is your daughter.'

'Susan!' and the mother's tears were turned to laughter as she thought of Susan looking after the house. 'It can't never be,' she decided, after a moment's thought. 'I can't go away.'

'You will either go out of town for a little while or to prison,' said Denis very quietly.

Mrs Ford had another fit of palsy, then she plucked up a little courage, and said irritably,—

'Prison! Wish I'd never set eyes on the dirty brat; never thought as through having him I should be hoist out of my home.'

'A little change of air will do you good,' remarked Denis soothingly; 'and I will see that you are made comfortable in every way. There is a sovereign to begin with.'

'Oh, if you'll stand the ready, sir, well I don't so much mind,' she said, taking up the sovereign and spitting on it for luck.

At this moment the door opened and Susan flashed in, throwing a parcel she was carrying down on the table, with a

'Drat bundles! say I. I wish the folk they belong to had the carrying of them.'

She did not see Denis; the room being rather dark. When she did perceive him, the sight of him there seemed to give her more surprise than pleasure.

CHAPTER VII.

IN ST JAMES' SQUARE.

BOUT half-past two on the day following Denis' temporary installation in the Fords' back parlour, Mrs Ford came out of the house and peered up and down the street curiously. There was no one about, not even the old *chiffonniere* collecting rags in the gutter, so looking back and giving utterance to a rough 'Come on, quick,' she went out, followed by a very small and rather sickly-looking little girl shabbily dressed with an assumption of gentility in a rusty black velveteen suit and a dark red Mother Hubbard bonnet, with a very full cap round her pale face. Scarcely any of the child's hair showed—what little there was being

combed down in a fringe on her forehead. Mrs Ford carried a much-used leather bag, which seemed to be stuffed full with things, and considering that it was heavy she walked very quickly—too quickly for the child, who was obliged to run to keep up with her, and who every now and then gave utterance to a suppressed sob, occasionally receiving a reprimand for what Mrs Ford called 'howling.' It did not entirely stop the sobs, however; they came too surely from the child's heart to be easily repressed. The little legs were getting very tired, and the child clutched nervously at the skirt of Mrs Ford's black stuff gown, as though to be helped along.

'Am I walking too fast for you, brat? Why, you haven't got no go in you at all.'

'I'm very tired,' said the child. 'Have we far to go?'

'We'll get in a fine "'bus" presently, and then you can sit on my lap.'

The only answer was another of those little half sobs, and then they went on for another brief space in silence, Mrs Ford, however, not walking quite so fast. Cross-

ing Piccadilly she caught the child up under one arm and carried her across the road; then setting her down once more, they passed quickly down one or two side streets and found themselves after a few minutes in St James' Square. Just at the corner of King Street they were stopped by a—

'Hullo, missus so I've found you at last, have I? Never at home when I call at your place.'

Mrs Ford tried to treat this very unwelcome interruption jocosely.

'Why, Ellis, I'm right down glad to see you—not at home to you?—why, I told Susan only t'other day to invite ye to tea. Come Monday.'

'Come Monday. None of your sneaking pretences, Mrs F. Come Monday, and when I get there you'll be gone to nurse a sick friend or some such d—d lie.'

She smiled.

'Lor', Ellis, as if I ever treated my old friends like that, unless I was pushed to it.'

'When ye owes 'em money you does, and look ye, Mrs Ford, I ain't going to have any more of your darned rubbish—it is

five pounds sixteen and fourpence for coals delivered, and I'll have it every stiver, fourpence included.'

'But not now here in this street. You don't think I carry my savin's about with me, even if I had any, which I haven't. You shall have it all in time, Ellis; but you must not be hard on a poor woman, and I *am* poor, you know. Just come Monday, as I said afore, and you shall have a pound, perhaps two, but I can't stop now, I want to ketch a city "'bus." I'm taking this 'ere child of my poor niece's, what's bad with consumption, back to see her mother afore she dies. She's been staying with me a bit.'

'You ain't going city wards—you always was a humbug, and you always will be, Mrs F.'

At this moment the child, who has relaxed her hold of Mrs Ford's dress, and is standing against the palings of an adjacent area, resting from her rough walk, sets up a cry of 'Mamma—mamma.'

A Victoria is turning the corner into the square. Lady George is sitting in it alone. She hears the voice. It is her Dandy's. She

would know it among ten thousand. She calls out instantly to the coachman to stop, and looks round wildly to see from whence the sound proceeds.

Two fair-haired little boys are crossing the road with their French *bonne;* but they are jabbering together in baby-argument about the length of their hoop sticks. They do not even see her. Besides, they are Lady Almeed's twins; she recognises them, and turns her head anxiously on the other side. It has taken at least fifty yards for the coachman, who is never very prompt, to draw up. Lady George kneels on the seat of the carriage and looks back, but save the twins, there is not a little boy anywhere. There is a low-looking man standing laughing at the corner of King Street. He is Mrs Ford's dun, and although pretty well accustomed to the vicissitudes of life, is half astonished and half amused at the suddenness of what has taken place, for Mrs Ford no sooner heard Dandy's cry than she caught him up once more under her arm, thrust, as well as she could with the hand that held the leather bag, the corner of her shawl into his mouth as a gag, and being an active woman,

sped very quickly into a chemist's shop that was close by.

Lady George, meanwhile, had got out of the carriage and was walking almost in Mrs Ford's footsteps down King Street, she even paused at the chemist's door and looked in; but Mrs Ford had taken the precaution to carry her little charge into the back shop, where, seating the seeming little girl on a chair, while she stood in front of her, she asked for a good strong dose of sal volatile, 'as she was took that bad she couldn't get on no furder.' She drank her sal volatile with a very grim expression on her face; it was not the sort of liquor to which Mrs Ford was prone, and as she set down her glass she saw Lady George walking rapidly back towards the square on the opposite side. On reaching her carriage, she paused to speak to the servants, and Mrs Ford, still keeping up the little comedy she had practised on the chemist about being ill, called a four-wheel cab that was passing, pushed Dandy into it, who by this time was crying with all his might, and desired the man to drive them to the Vauxhall Road,—in a few minutes

the poor little mite was farther away from his mother than ever; angering Mrs Ford very much too by perpetually repeating, 'It was *my* mamma. Dandy quite sure it was mamma.'

'You've got no mamma,' she said, shaking him; 'so don't keep a talkin' that nonsense, because no one believes you.'

'Got no mamma,' he repeated; 'but I have. I did see her. Oh, mamma, come to Dandy,' and he jumped off the cab-seat and tried to put his little head out of the window.

Mrs Ford having deposited her bag opposite to her, took him on her lap rather roughly; but perhaps she was touched by the sight of the large tears that filled his eyes, for she spoke much more gently than usual, in fact almost caressingly.

'If you're a good little man and don't cry, you shall have a nice penny bun all to yourself.'

But Dandy did not want penny buns, he wanted his mamma,—the sight of her as she passed having re-awakened all his love.

'But it *was* mamma,' he said; 'and coachman and John and both the gees. Coachman lets me ride on Beauty sometimes.'

'All right, so you shall again some day,' said Mrs Ford, at her wits' end to know how to quiet him.

'Soon?'

'Yes, when you are a big boy.'

Dandy gave one of his habitual little sobs. The day when he should be a big boy seemed a long way off, and he wanted his mamma now. He was logical enough, though he was only four, to have an idea that if he could only see coachman and the gees he should get to his mamma.

Mrs Ford had not yet succeeded in talking the seeming little girl into a happier state of mind, when the cab drew up not far from the Victoria Station at the commencement of the Vauxhall Bridge Road. She arranged the Mother Hubbard bonnet, which, unused to such head gear, poor Dandy had nearly tumbled off, wetted her dirty finger and plastered down the fringe, took up her important leather bag, and having let the cabman lift Dandy out, she followed him, paid the fare and hailed a Brixton omnibus. Yes, Brixton was Mrs Ford's destination, there she and the little

girl were to reside during Captain Denis' good pleasure, or as long as the funds lasted. So that actually the very money which Lady George was supplying to Denis under the pretext that he was looking for her child, served to carry him farther away from her. When Denis had received that roll of notes he had not got five shillings in his waistcoat pocket.

If Basil Armfield and Mr Green could only have known how utterly they had failed in judgment by advising that he should be supplied with cash! The child must have stayed on at the Fords' house if there had been no funds to take him farther away, but now—

Lady George remained in the neighbourhood of St James' Square till dark, so sure did she feel that that piteous cry of 'mamma' came from none other than her boy. She sent John the footman, who did not believe in the least that the child who had called out was Master Dandy, in one direction, while she herself went in another, and the carriage drove round the square at intervals. Lady George

asked countless people if they had passed a fair-haired little boy; but they only shook their heads, while some of them thought her mad, so earnest was her manner. She even made inquiries in the very chemist's shop where Mrs Ford had taken refuge, but though a woman and a little girl had been there, the civil chemist could not remember having seen a boy of the age she mentioned in the shop that day. If Lady George had only gone into that chemist's shop at the beginning instead of the end of her search!

Weary in mind and body as the day waned, she got once more into the carriage in despair and allowed herself to be driven to the wretched home, which, since Dandy had left it, had lost all charm for her, and which even Basil Armfield's occasional presence—though she had almost owned to herself of late that she was beginning to love him—failed to brighten.

It looked desolate enough as she entered it, now indeed rendered doubly so by that gleam of hope she had received, that half cry she had heard during her drive.

She sank down in her accustomed place on the sofa, merely giving her bonnet and cloak to her maid, not troubling to go upstairs, and for a while she gazed abstractedly at the fire as it burned cheerily, the room being dark save for the light it shed, till the butler came in with the lamp, then she perceived a pile of notes and cards which lay awaiting her on the table close by.

She ran her eye over them, but with little curiosity. What mattered it to her now whether people gave parties or died or lived?

'A ball at Craigietoun's! Why, Margaret never told me!' she said to herself. 'I wonder why they are giving a ball? Margaret is very fond of gaiety. How intolerably useless it all seems to me now. Of course I shall not go to their ball. They will not expect me.'

But they would expect her; and that she knew while she was contradicting it in her mind. Lady Craigietoun was one of those women who do not understand why people should shut themselves up, whatever befalls.

She hated misery in every phase, and had, moreover, a decided theory that most miseries were imaginary, and that it was invariably possible and far wiser to take the next best, when you could not obtain the thing you liked the most. She would not perhaps have been exactly flattered had she heard how her friends and acquaintances called her heartless and worldly. She herself gloried in the idea that she was a perambulating philosopher. She loved balls and excitement and admiration, notwithstanding her philosophy, and was particularly bored by all individuals who elected to take a grave or melancholy view of life, her sister-in-law among them. In fact, there were few people about whose actions Lady Craigietoun cavilled more than Lady George's. It was a constant repetition of the old story concerning relations; what the one did the other was sure, more or less, if not mentally, at least verbally to find fault with; the disapproval being as a rule the more positively shown by Lady Craigietoun.

Under the circumstances, whichever way

Lady George answered the invitation she had just found on her table, it would be wrong. If she refused it she would be called miserable and disagreeable for always puling after that stupid child; if she went to the ball she would be designated as a heartless, unfeeling mother.

Knowing her sister-in-law as well as Lady George did, she was probably quite prepared for all this, and as on other occasions determined to be solely guided by the dictates of her own feelings. Neither of them, while they were both ready for a little feminine passage-at-arms on the meanest provocation, could form any idea what a storm in a tea-cup the giving this ball was about to provoke.

CHAPTER VIII.

NOT TO BE INVITED.

LORD and Lady Craigietoun are breakfasting *tête-à-tête* in the well-appointed drawing-room in Eaton Square. They have not spoken much for some minutes, both being busily engaged in opening the numerous letters which lie on each side of their plates. Lady Craigietoun, woman-like, is the first to break the silence.

'Craigietoun, you agree with me, do you not—Mr Basil Armfield is not to be asked to my ball?'

'Yes. I think we settled it so, my love, but if you see any cause for changing your opinion, well—'

'None,' she answered very decidedly, not

giving him time to finish his sentence. 'None, only there is a note from Julia asking for an invitation for him.'

'Tell Julia we do not approve of the young man, and that we cannot encourage her acquaintance with him,' and Lord Craigietoun bent his head once more over his letters, as though having given his opinion he did not wish to be troubled any farther about the matter.

Lord Craigietoun and Marquis of that ilk was a man who, as a rule, interfered very little in social affairs. He left the management of them entirely to the Marchioness, who, he had every reason to believe, was perfectly capable of sitting unassisted at the helm. And he was right, Lady Craigietoun always did what seemed to her fit, talking his lordship into her views, and, when occasion demanded, putting him forward to enforce the observance of her decrees. It was not that Lord Craigietoun was a weak man, far from it, on the contrary, he was, at least in the mouths of his flatterers and in his own estimation, one of the lights of agriculture. That it was his all-engrossing hobby there

could be no doubt. He took good care that everybody should know that he wrote upon it, lectured upon it, and illustrated his views concerning it upon his vast estates in Roxburghshire, both in the shape of model farms and otherwise. Though somewhat, in fact one might say, a good deal crabbed, hard, and unmalleable in disposition, anybody could do wonders with him by a reference to his having been the first (he really was one of the first) to point out that lime, so extensively and even blindly used by all farmers, is more of a medicine than a food to the land—a stimulant which exhausts rather than a nourisher which enriches it. As he himself might be described as an accentuated Scotchman, so his estate was an accentuated Scotch estate. There he planted, ploughed, and bred to his heart's content, but he would allow his tenants neither to breed cocks and hens, nor to increase and multiply their own species. There was no more godly church-going, *sawbath*-observing *meenister*-toadying race on earth; but their piety had not the slightest influence on their morals. They would drink whisky to a

man, ay, and to a woman, whenever they could get it, and as much of it as they could get, while they commonly lived and died in that state which is neither marriage nor single blessedness; and this, pray remark, not only as regards labourers and bondagers, but up to the very largest and richest tenant-farmers in all the country side. So that on second thoughts it is incorrect to say that he interfered with the prolificness of his people, or at least he only did so in the indirect sense that though he cared not at all how many came into the world, never in any way interfering in their domestic concerns, he set his face obstinately against the slightest permanent increase of the population on his domain. If children chose to be born upon that model spot, it was at the peril of banishment into outer darkness—in at least two cases out of three—so soon as they should be grown up. His lordship did not trouble himself to inquire where they went; they might, in his own plain words, 'go to the devil if they liked, so they did not stay at Craigietoun.' A Tory in its oldest and, therefore, worst sense—and, to do him justice,

he laid no claim to be considered that most liberal of all things, a Modern Conservative —he was never weary of expatiating on the evils of over-population. To them he attributed all the woes and crimes of Ireland. It was said that he once so horrified an eminent American political economist that the poor man was in bed for a week from one single sentence. To be sure his bodily constitution can hardly have been so strong as he asserted his national one to be. Having brought a powerful letter from our representative at Washington, which spoke highly of the bearer's knowledge of mineral manures, Lord Craigietoun received him with the nearest approach to cordiality of which he was capable, and finding he was not one of the few Americans who had ever been outside a horse, he took him a drive through his estate. They conversed most pleasantly for a while on earthy, mouldy, and other sympathetic topics till they got upon this theme of numbers of human beings to the square mile. As his lordship explained, the stranger's face grew more and more scandalised in its expression, more and more aghast. He was

gathering all his strength, all his learning, all his eloquence—which, I believe, was great—for a crushing reply, when his entertainer, stretching out both hands towards the park-like country around them, with intense complacency ended his exposition with the following climax :—

'Here,' he said, 'you have before you the true perfection of government, the *greatest happiness of the smallest number.*'

He paused for a reply. Getting none, he looked round; his companion had fainted.

That, however, was two years ago.

Such being the bias of his mind, he usually acquiesced in or set his veto against social matters, etc., accordingly as my lady voted for or against them, trusting to her decision, not taking the trouble to go into them himself.

She had told him that Basil Armfield was a young adventurer of whom she feared Lady George was growing just a little too fond, and that, for the honour of the family, he ought to be discouraged by them, as such a marriage for his brother's widow would be too disgraceful. He scarcely knew Basil by

'Had he breakfasted?' was the first question.

Of course not. When had Captain Denis ever partaken of a repast when one was offered to him gratis? A fresh *couvert* was brought and a hot dish of cutlets. Everything was done *en grand* in the Craigietoun establishment; meantime Captain Denis apologised for his early intrusion, giving as his excuse that he particularly wished to see them both on business.

'About little Dandy?' Lady Craigietoun asked as soon as the servants had left the room.

'Indirectly—yes. But before I make any observations, may I ask that they shall be in perfect confidence?'

'Certainly,' said Lord Craigietoun, 'you may rely on me, and as for Margaret, though she is a lady, I think she knows when to be silent.'

'Trust *me*, Captain Denis?' echoed her ladyship, who liked Captain Denis and was as ready to believe in him as her sister-in-law seemed to be in Basil Armfield.

Not that she loved him. Lady Craigie-

toun was too heartless to allow herself to be swayed by any *grande passion*, and too prudent to allow a love of mere admiration to induce her to *afficher* herself with any one individual; still she liked Captain Denis. The profound mystery in which most of his actions were shrouded interested her, and because she could never get any nearer in learning the history of his inner life, she was the more anxious to penetrate the darkness with which he was wont to conceal it. Margaret, Marchioness of Craigietoun, was not a pretty woman, but she was a powerful one both by position and character. And power, being in Henry Denis' eyes a more uncommon and more excellent gift than beauty, which, as he was wont to aver, he could find at every turn he took in the crowded London streets, he had long since poured incense on the shrine of this rare Margaret, and received in return a high place in her friendship, the tranquil post of friend suiting him far better than that of lover would have done, inconstant by nature as he was and disinclined to submit to the many sacrifices that would be

demanded of him as cavalier *servente* to one of the greatest ladies in London. But if Denis was a man who could brook no shackles, neither could Lady Craigietoun. She would never have married if she had not thought to gain power with her marchioness's cornet; but she let the fetters her husband and children necessarily cast about her bind her very loosely, always managing to have a velvet inclosure to every family chain, so that her own flesh might be protected from friction, and of all other forms of thraldom she imagined she kept perfectly clear, invariably, however, forgetting that she was the absolute and most abject slave of public opinion.

Denis had cast on her a lingering glance as he bowed gallantly when she asked him to trust her. The double action for a wordless man like him signifying that he would do so till death. Then, turning round, he addressed the marquis.

'You cannot think how sorry I am about all this,' he said. 'I have given it mature consideration, and, as a friend of the family, I have arrived at the conclusion that I ought

to come and have a serious talk with you.'

'About little Dandy, of course? Has any fresh complication arisen? I have left the matter quite in your hands, Denis. You are a better man of business than I am, and equally interested in my sister-in-law's affairs.'

'Exactly. And being interested I am exceedingly sorry to observe the sort of people with whom she allows herself to be surrounded. There is a certain Mr Armfield—'

'Why, Margaret,' interrupted Lord Craigietoun, 'that is your *bête noire*.'

Captain Denis gave her an approving look, upon which she observed,—

'Lady George has written this morning to ask for an invitation for him to my ball.'

'You will not grant the request, dear Lady Craigietoun, you will not?'

'No, indeed, I have just settled with Lord Craigietoun to answer in the negative.'

'I am delighted!' went on Denis, warm-

ing with his subject. 'If we do not make a stand against this young man there will be no limit to Lady George's infatuation.'

'Who the devil is this fellow, Denis? Where did Julia make his acquaintance?' asked Lord Craigietoun.

Captain Denis, who had finished his cutlet, pushed his plate on one side and leant on the table confidentially towards his lordship.

'He is a young adventurer who is seeking to struggle into society by means of a rich marriage. He has taken Lady George's taper fingers in his soft hand, but she, wrapped up in her love for Dandy, has determined, as you know, not to re-marry, and has therefore managed to elude his pressure. He therefore finds it expedient to seize, not so gently or softly, the child himself.'

'You do not really suspect that—'

'I do more than suspect; I *almost* know.'

'Why, then, do you not talk to Lady George? Her love for Dandy is greater than her regard for this adventurer, you say.'

'She would not believe one word; would

only smile defiantly. He says he is looking for the child, and she believes him. I thought it wiser to let her labour under her temporary delusion and appeal to you.'

'But what object has the fellow got? What does he mean to do ultimately? Plots and counterplots are puzzles to me,' and Lord Craigietoun looked worried.

'Well, I suppose—of course, I only suppose this—some portion of what I have told you I know for a fact. I suppose he intends, after dallying with Lady George's feelings for a while, to coerce her into a marriage with the promise that on the wedding-day he will produce the child.'

'What a diabolical scheme! And such a fellow is suffered to be at large?'

'Nothing is proved against him, you see, and my advice is that we all remain perfectly silent and watchful till the proofs are indisputable. My agents are of course keenly on his track, though I am compelled by policy to keep on friendly terms with the fellow when I meet him.'

'And what do you advise and wish us to do?' asked Lady Cragietoun softly.

'Simply to use your influence with Lady George, in order to induce her to give up her infatuation for this man, without of course using my name or letting her for a moment think that you imagine Armfield has aught to do with Dandy's disappearance.'

'I will go and see her this morning, instead of writing, and explain how utterly impossible it is for me to invite a man of that calibre into my house.'

'Mr Armfield goes into very good society. You must base your refusal entirely on personal dislike.'

'Perhaps then I had better write a testy note.'

'I think so.'

'And leave me out of it entirely. I shall not act till Denis obtains farther information,' remarked his lordship.

'Of course. You have nothing to do with invitations to my ball. I'll write the note while you are finishing your talk with Captain Denis, and then you can both read it.'

'DEAR JULIA,—I am sorry I cannot invite your friend to my ball; but I have many

personal acquaintances to ask, and my rooms are not large enough to include those with whom I do not particularly care to associate. Your affectionate sister, MARGARET.'

It was so tart and terse and invidious that Henry Denis smiled as, having perused it, he said it would do admirably, and passed it to his lordship. 'He could never have accomplished such a crushing missive,' he thought. 'No, for letter writing commend him to a woman,' and he felt satisfied with his morning's work. He believed he had gained not only a valuable coadjutrix by Lady Craigietoun's evinced readiness to make herself disagreeable to Basil, but also still more powerful collaboration from his lordship's veto being set on the young man's advancement. He presently took up his hat, and undertaking to post the note, he left Eaton Square to carry out if possible the fulfilment of other dark schemes in numberless varieties of which he was constantly engaged.

'What would Julia think of her note? Would she silently accept her refusal to in-

both Craigietoun and myself take in your concerns.'

'Indeed; and how so, pray?'

'We are sorry to see you so infatuated about this boy, who has neither name, position, or, as far as I know, character.'

'Margaret! This is a little too much! I do not think you have any right to speak to me in such a tone. I will take care that you do not have the opportunity of doing so again.'

And Lady George, who had never sat down during any part of the interview, opened the door and went out on to the landing. She was thoroughly angry, but she had not lost command of her feelings, and perhaps she still hoped that Lady Craigietoun would say something conciliatory, for she paused for a second before she went down the stairs.

Not a word, however, did Lady Craigietoun utter. She was determined to throw every obstacle she could in the way of Lady George's intimacy with Basil Armfield; and if she gave in now, she felt that all the ground she had gained by making this vigorous stand would be lost.

Lady George went out of the house, got into her carriage, and desired the coachman to drive round Hyde Park. Meanwhile, she would reason with herself, try to soothe her excited nerves, and decide what she should say to Basil Armfield.

The result of her self-communings was that she resolved to tell him nothing, and never to let him know that she had asked for an invitation for him to Lady Craigietoun's ball, and been refused.

CHAPTER IX.

DIPLOMACY.

SEVERAL days passed and the sisters-in-law did not meet. They both stood on their dignity, and were resolved not to unsay a single rash word. At no time had there been any love between them, but now the feeling with which they regarded each other amounted to absolute hatred. Lady George's pride was wounded, and if the quarrel lasted till the end of time, she was not likely to make any attempt to re-establish peace. Lady Craigietoun was certainly not endowed with a more conciliatory spirit, but she was vexed as she wondered what people would say to this unseemly rupture between two families who, in outward appearance at all

events, had invariably been on the best of terms. Yet come what would, she was resolved not to give in; besides, she could not without appearing cowardly. She had talked the matter over with her *fides Achates*, Denis, and of course he had begged her not to have Basil at the ball at any cost.

'Seeing him in her house would so thoroughly *afficher* him to the world as a family friend,' he said, 'which would be very awkward and disagreeable when the time came for his true character to be revealed.'

Of course Lady Craigietoun allowed herself to be guided, but she did not like the position of affairs any better because she suffered it.

The night of the ball was drawing very near. If no reconciliation was effected before the 13th of June, when the ball was to take place, Lady Craigietoun knew that the rupture would be final. But how was it to be brought about?

'Craigietoun must arrange it. Julia had a sort of respect for Craigietoun. She would not be likely to flout him.'

The next difficulty was to get Craigietoun

to move. He so hated to be brought into active interference with social events, that he never could be induced to interfere unless thoroughly roused.

She must use the spur, as she well knew how to do, and see if Craigietoun could not bring this silly Julia to what Margaret was pleased to call her senses. A *catalogue raisonné* of the numberless little devices and short nagging sentences, by which she sought to obtain this end, would weary the reader intolerably; not more, however, than they wearied Lord Craigietoun, who, at last, in sheer desperation, undertook to go and pay the recalcitrant Julia a visit, hoping then to be allowed once more to enjoy the *dolce far niente* of his bucolic dreams and theories.

'Lady George was alone.' He had inquired significantly. 'Yes, she would see Lord Craigietoun.'

She liked her late husband's brother; he reminded her at times of Lord George, and she did not in the least anticipate that his coming had anything whatever to do with the little *fracas* about the ball; in all probability he had not even heard of it.

Even if he had, so much the better. Lady George was in her heart a little glad of a peaceful overture from the elder branch of the house. She was no more anxious for an open quarrel than was the marchioness, especially as she did not wish Basil to know aught of it or its cause.

She received Lord Craigietoun very cordially, but she did not ask after his wife; and of course the conversation at once drifted on the one all-engrossing topic, the disappearance of little Dandy.

'I think you are on the wrong track—altogether on the wrong track, and Denis thinks so too,' observed his lordship, after Lady George had told him how every effort to find him had as yet failed.

She smiled at the mention of Denis' name, but she was too well aware of the height he had attained in Lady Craigietoun's favour to think it wise to raise the slightest suspicion against him, though she firmly believed he knew more of Dandy than any one else. She only said very quietly,—

'I do not understand what you mean by a wrong track. I have given Captain Denis

carte blanche to use what means he sees fit to find my boy. He knows too that I would give the last penny I possess to recover my poor little precious darling. His voice has haunted me ever since I heard him calling me in St James' Square.'

'You must have been mistaken that day,' said his lordship, who had heard of what had happened from his wife.

'No, indeed—besides—some suspected people disappeared that very day.'

'No! I was not aware of that. What became of them?' and Lord Craigietoun's interest seemed awakened.

'They have not yet been traced—but I forgot. I have been begged to repeat nothing, as talking on these matters might defeat the very object I have at heart.'

'You do not think me trustworthy,' he said, a little hurt.

'I do, Craigietoun, I do; but you see you are not exactly on the search, and therefore not acquainted with all the details.'

She was right, Lord Craigietoun was perfectly honest and trustworthy, as loyal and honourable a man, as any of whom the House

of Peers can boast, but he unfortunately suffered from limited perception, and was therefore frequently reduced to seeing with his wife's vision, *ergo*, in many instances with that of Captain Denis.

If the day should ever come when he had sufficent energy to take the scales off his eyes and look for himself, he would have but little difficulty in walking straight forward on the right path or in knowing with half a glance an honest man from a rogue.

'I hope you do not think it is because I am not interested in you and your child that I have taken no active measures; but when you are in such good hands as those of Denis, it seems to me as if my services would be *de trop*,' he said, explaining.

'I would rather rely on your help than on that of Captain Denis; but under the circumstances I know that is impossible,' was the somewhat pointed answer, though Lord Craigietoun failed to note its force.

The knowledge of Denis' love for Lady George, and her intense dislike to and mistrust of him had not come to Lord

Craigietoun's knowledge; if he gave his mind to the subject at all, perhaps he imagined the little silent officer admired his own wife, in whom, however, be it said, he reposed the strictest confidence.

He looked at Lady George for a moment, as though seeking to penetrate the exact meaning of her words; failing, however, to do so, he floundered a little awkwardly into the mission on which he had been sent.

'Oh, about that Mr—Mr Armfield—he is a friend of yours, I believe? Margaret is very sorry she cannot have at him her ball, but you see the rooms will be very full.'

'Margaret and I settled the subject more than a week ago. It is a pity to refer to it again,' said Lady George very stiffly.

'Yes, I know, but Margaret thinks you are offended.'

'I do not suppose it matters very much whether I am or not?'

'My dear Julia, trouble has made you unlike your usual kind conciliatory self. You are, I hope, fully aware that affection alone prompts my actions and Margaret's whenever you are concerned.'

'I know, Craigietoun, that you have always been very good to me. I should be sorry to do anything to annoy *you.*'

There was just a slight stress on the you.

'Then, overlook any little passage-at-arms that may have occurred between you and my wife, and let me have the pleasure of seeing your sweet face among the crowd on the thirteenth.'

Lady George smiled.

'So this dear, good, trusty man had been sent blindly to persuade her to come to the ball, that Mother Grundy might not inquire the reason of her absence,' she thought; but she only said in her usual quiet way,—

'The trouble I am in, the anguish I have gone through of late, ought to excuse me from any ball in London.'

'I know—I know—but a little society will do you good. I do not apprehend that your child will be kept from you long, or that he will be ill-treated, and I personally shall esteem it a great favour if you will come.'

'I wonder why?' asked Lady George with a half laugh.

He did not like to say, 'Because it will save an endless scene at home,' so he turned the situation into a compliment, and told her how his love for his dead brother had extended itself to his widow, and that he did not think a *fête* should take place at his house without her.

It was not humbug; there was not a particle of humbug in Lord Craigietoun's composition, and Lady George knew it. Moreover, she was perfectly aware that he really liked her; so many little incidents in the past had proved it.

'I will look in at the ball for half-an-hour if it will afford you any gratification—unequal to it though I feel,' she said, holding out her hand to him, which he took and pressed warmly.

The marchioness was indeed a clever diplomatist in sending her husband thus to smooth her path with Lady George.

His mission was at an end, but Lord Craigietoun sat on for nearly half-an-hour talking pleasantly to his sister-in-law, who,

however, as he subsequently remarked, always led the conversation away whenever it reverted to little Dandy.

At last he rose to take his leave by one of those lucky chances which only occur occasionally in life just at the very right moment, for scarcely had he turned the corner of Chapel Street into Park Street, when Basil Armfield knocked at the door of Lady George's house, having entered the street from the opposite end. The rencontre might have been an awkward one.

Basil did not find Lady George as amiable as was her wont when with him. Her interview with Lord Craigietoun had annoyed her; the mysterious entanglement of events perplexed her. She was told to believe in Denis and mistrust Basil, while her heart bade her trust Basil and regard Denis as a worthless scoundrel.

The combinations with which destiny had surrounded her of late seemed to draw forth all the latent irritability of her character, and Basil, being on very intimate terms in her house, received a full share of the discharge.

He had called, intending to ask Lady

George if she had succeeded in getting him an invitation for Lady Craigietoun's ball, to which he had hinted some weeks ago that he should like to go, and of which, since then, not one word had been spoken; but she snubbed him so shortly when he mentioned it, that he resolved not to speak to her on the subject again.

'How could he expect her to think of balls while her darling Dandy's fate was uncertain?' she said. 'It would be bad enough if she had to show herself there. She was surprised Mr Armfield could be so inconsiderate as to allude to it.'

The words were even less querulous than the tone, and though Basil, as he walked home, wondered why it was imperative that Lady George should go to this ball, he determined, none the less, that she should never be asked the question by him.

'In diplomacy,' though Basil called himself, he had got to learn many things in connection with the true diplomatic workings of that wonderful kingdom Society, governed as they are by clever, intriguing, feminine brains.

Basil Armfield was to all appearance but a cipher in the great account; yet there was a radiant smile on the Marchioness of Craigietoun's face when her noble husband informed her that he had done her behest, and that Julia, waving her request for an invitation for Mr Armfield, would come to the ball.

In the first place, she rejoiced that she had beaten another woman on the fair arena of a drawing-room fray; no mean victory to one who plumed herself on her social successes as did Lady Craigietoun; secondly, she was pleased because she had gained ground for Henry Denis, who, she knew, hated this Armfield adventurer, and was for ever confiding to her how he was bamboozling Lady George, and invading on his personal rights as trustee.

Rare Margaret need not look into the long mirror, which reaches from the ceiling to the floor of her boudoir, so inquisitively as her husband leaves her about half-an-hour before the usual time for Henry Denis' daily visit. Ay, her prune satin bodice fits her trim figure to perfection. Not one

single hair among her close plaits is awry, but he will not remark it.

He is in love with the Madonna-like Julia, and is determined to appropriate her and her future at any cost, or perish socially, if not bodily, in the attempt. You, Marchioness, with all your cleverness for amalgamations, are but this man's tool; and as you meet him with extended hand and a little cry of 'Victory!' on your lip, you are but scoring against yourself, and becoming, as many another intriguing woman has done before you, the dupe of your own weakness!

CHAPTER X.

BURNING LAVA.

THE Polwheles live in Cromwell Road. They are the fashion.

What an enormous amount of effort and success does that word fashion convey! — especially if you ask simply—

'Who are the Polwheles?'

Genealogically the answer will be short, and given in a very faint whisper,—

'Polwhele *père* was a paper-maker.'

No one ever inquires any farther back, but asks at once,—

'How then are they the fashion?'

'He made money, gave his only son, the present man, a liberal education; he was

called to the bar, is a Right Honourable, and married a pushing woman.'

The latter is probably the reason of their well-established position—not that the Right Honourable John Polwhele does not appreciate it to the very fullest. Not one of the family—and his offspring is numerous—is more delighted than he is when a grand dinner is given in Cromwell Road and a string of coroneted carriages sets down the somewhat too welcomely received guests.

Everybody goes. The chef is an absolute valet, the wine sans pareil, 'and then we all meet each other, you know.' The Polwheles are far too clever to invite any outsiders. All the people they knew when they first started up the social ladder have been cut long ago.

Naturally they are laughed at for the many traps they lay to catch sunbeams, and their little vulgarities are frequently alluded to by their various noble guests on their return to the privacy of their respective homes. In fact, the Right Honourable John's pompous strut, or his wife's corny-

ing voice, are not unfrequently imitated by the more humorous of their acquaintances. But that all goes for nothing; they are the fashion, and on terms of absolute intimacy with several leading members of the aristocracy.

Amongst others Mrs Polwhele has quite the *entrée* in Eaton Square, counting the Marquis and Marchioness of Craigietoun among her greatest friends.

On the 13th of June, the night of the ball which has so nearly brought about a rupture between the two sisters-in-law, the Polwheles had a large dinner-party. Basil Armfield was one of their guests. He was very intimate in the house, and frequently dined there.

Though a detrimental, by virtue of his good manners, pleasant conversation, and the position he had made for himself in society, Basil had become quite a sought-after diner out.

Several people had, however, observed that Basil was much quieter of late, and more preoccupied than was his wont. Mrs Polwhele among others had not failed to

remark it, taking as she did almost a motherly interest in the young man. Not a sentence about the Craigietouns' prejudice against him had reached her, or very certainly Mrs Polwhele would have been less *empressée* in her invitations to Basil; but Lady Craigietoun was far too diplomatic to air her likes and dislikes for people unless she considered there was an object in view, and she failed to see what Mrs Polwhele could have to do with this little family dispute.

Mrs Polwhele was naturally a far less luminous body in Lady Craigietoun's firmament, than was the great lady who shone as a planet in that of her revolving satellite.

Among those invited to the Polwheles' dinner-party was an American girl, Miss Astor, who had just come from the States, and was on a visit to the family of the American minister in London. She could not be called pretty, for she had not a well-formed feature in her face, which was pert and rather coarsely moulded, those faults, however, being redeemed by a singularly brilliant complexion and a geniality of manner

and elasticity of spirits which almost overpowered you before you had been in Miss Astor's society for five minutes. The combination had very much the same effect as a bunch of magnolias in a drawing-room.

Noting Basil's depressed condition, Mrs Polwhele sent him into dinner with Miss Astor. He had never met her before, in fact she had only been in England for about a fortnight.

Before the first *entrée* had been handed round, she had dazzled, startled, astonished, and certainly silenced him, that is as far as all language, save that of the eyes, is concerned. For he looked at her with such bewilderment in his gaze that Blanche Astor, though accustomed to devotion and admiration from men, was fairly taken aback by the glances she received from what she called, when speaking of Basil later to Mrs Polwhele, 'the ecstatic luminaries of beauty Armfield.' Being taken aback did not, however, render Miss Astor shy, that was a word of which she would have told you she had never learnt the derivation; on the contrary, his notice of her seemed to en-

hance the power of the charm she strove to cast about him.

She talked the more merrily, laughed the more ripplingly, pouted her ruddy lips the more fully, glanced at him with her dancing eyes the more saucily, as she perceived the sort of vague discomfort with which Basil looked up and down the long table as though seeking some means of escape from the chains this woman was casting about him, and which wounded where they riveted.

Yet Blanche Astor had no object in making a captive of Basil beyond the mere amusement of the hour. She intended to use her wonderful attractions for business purposes some day, when she found the right person; for the present she was only practising.

Blanche Astor, like most women who exercise an undue and miraculous amount of power over men, was decidedly heartless. She might some day feel a passion, never an affection; for the present she had escaped utterly scathless.

The dinner went on, and Basil ate and

talked and breathed as one in a dream. He seemed to feel rather than to hear the sound of Miss Astor's voice, which fell on his ear like the foaming wavelets of a sparkling cascade as they flirt their spray over the flowerets that grow around. He hardly knew what she said; he was only conscious of the power of sound, and for the moment his every sense was intoxicated. Occasionally he would look at her, but he did not dare to do so often. She was dressed in cream-white satin, and her neck and shoulders were bare, a small necklace of pearls being their only ornament. Her arms, too, were uncovered, and as the moulded dimpled elbow occasionally touched Basil when she moved, it set the hot blood coursing like molten lava through his veins.

'She was going to Lady Craigietoun's ball. Was he?'

He answered briefly in the negative.

'Not going!'

She said no more, but the accent expressed a volume.

He hung his head in sheer disappoint-

ment. He had been anxious to go for weeks past, thinking that Lady George would be there; but though she had studiously avoided telling him anything, he had fancied of late that there was some reason beyond mere carelessness on her part, why she had not asked her sister for this invitation for him.

Now he felt almost inclined to get up from the table and go to Chapel Street to insist that she should write for it at once.

But a sort of shame restrained him. He could not tell why he longed so ardently to go. He could not confide to this sweet woman, with whom for weeks past he had been so persistently pleading his love, that he had met a young American at Mrs Polwhele's dinner-party who had set his pulse raging to fever heat, and to encircle whose waist in the mazy waltz he would gladly give up ten years of life.

He could not, dared not do this, so he let his head droop on his breast and did not speak. Perhaps after all it was as well; this was only a momentary passing flame; he could never really love any one on the whole earth but Lady George.

The ladies left the dining-room.

Basil sipped more wine than he usually indulged in, but he felt utterly exhausted. It seemed as if the woman who had just left the room had taken more than half his life with her. He did not attempt to converse; a young cornet of dragoons with whom he was slightly acquainted pushed his chair close to him and began to tirade about the beautiful Miss Astor; but Basil only stared at him in surprise that he should dare to mention her name. So the cornet left him to his meditations, arriving at the conclusion that he was rather drunk.

Ay, was he.

At length he followed some other men upstairs.

She was sitting on a black satin sofa, lounging gracefully while she chatted with a lady who stood near her. She gave him just one glance from her saucy eyes and then turned away.

He was about to walk rapidly towards her, when he was stopped by Mrs Polwhele.

'My dear Mr Armfield, you do not mean

that you are not going to Lady Craigietoun's ball to-night?'

'I do not know Lady Craigietoun,' he answered stiffly.

'But you must come. It is impossible for you to stay away.'

'Since I am not invited?' he asked, smiling.

'I will take you with the greatest pleasure. I had a letter from Lady Craigietoun yesterday, telling me to bring any dancing men I liked. I should have written to you at once, only of course I thought you were going.'

'You really think I may go without a formal invitation?'

'Certainly — with me, since I have leave.'

'Thank you, Mrs Polwhele—thank you a thousand times.'

She laughed. Mrs Polwhele had not failed to remark the sudden manner in which Basil had been 'bowled over' by the fascinating Miss Astor.

Throwing them together was not an act of premeditation on her part, but if anything

serious came of it, so much the better, she thought. Miss Astor had a good fortune, though Mrs Polwhele shrewdly suspected that she intended to angle for a coronet. However, Mr Armfield must take his chance. She did not suppose it would hurt him much if he did not win her.

Mrs Polwhele was one of those women who do not believe in the existence of lasting feeling in a man.

The idea of going to the ball after all suddenly restored Basil's spirits from the utter state of depression to which they had sunk, back to their chronic genial phase. As soon as he could with civility bring his conversation with Mrs Polwhele to an end, he passed on to talk to Miss Astor, who made room for him on the sofa, and seemed perfectly ready to improve her ground.

Whether she would be as ready for his society amid the fashionable crowd in Lady Craigietoun's drawing-rooms, he had yet to prove; for the present, he was drinking in to the full of a cup far more intoxicating than Olympian nectar.

Half-an-hour later Miss Astor, chape-

roned by the wife of the American minister, started for Eaton Square, Basil Armfield remainining behind to accompany Mrs Polwhele and her daughter when all their guests should have departed.

CHAPTER XI.

WITHOUT A CARD.

IT so befel that for some time before the grand ball given by his wife, the most noble the Marquis of Craigietoun's temper —never anything to boast of—had been steadily on the decline, and upon the special evening in question he was not improbably the sourest man—or, at any rate, nobleman —in the three kingdoms; and the reason thereof was as follows :—

There was a certain river—the Shifter by name—which twisted and wound itself, like any coiling snake, here and there and everywhere through his lordship's estate. The conduct of this stream had in former days always been most exemplary. A river of

respectable size, it required a wonderfully prolonged rainy season for it to think of devastating its banks or flooding its owner's fields and meadows.

But times change, and manners with them. Little had Lord Craigietoun dreamt when he made himself, some thirty years before, a sort of apostle of the great drainage movement in the county, what would prove to be sooner or later the logical and inevitable result of his too zealous labours. Virtually you might say he had drained his whole estate by means of deep-laid pipes—arterial drainage, as it is technically called, into the Shifter. The consequence was, that that long-suffering servant found itself unwarrantably over-taxed, and after three or four warnings, which were but little attended to, it broke one November day into open rebellion, captured at one fell swoop and for ever some acres of prime land from its lord and master, and by way of protest, I suppose, established itself in temporary occupation of many hundreds more. It was hoped at first that the victorious Shifter might rest with the addition so made to its territory,

but this fond delusion was speedily dispelled. Two or three weeks of moderate rain was enough to set the Shifter, who was evidently a communist at heart, swelling and grasping, knocking down a great deal, and building nothing up.

What was to be done? Consternation filled the marquisorial breast. To undo the past was out of the question, for if arterial draining is a difficult operation, to undrain would simply mean ruin in every sense and aspect, if, indeed, such a process were physically possible. There was but one plan which seemed at all feasible. It was to guard as much as possible against a recurrence of such losses by embanking certain parts of the river which seemed in some danger of giving way. These had to be hardened by compression, turned over, and finally wattled, the whole process being one of considerable difficulty and greater expense. At a cost, however, of between four and five hundred pounds the work was completed. It was hoped, nay, it was asserted by experts, that the Shifter had been conquered, and could commit no farther enormities for

many long years to come, unless—and the reservation was admirable in its prudence —*unless* under very exceptional meteorological circumstances indeed.

Unluckily for our great man's equanimity, it was this immense improbability, according to the wiseacres, which had precisely taken the liberty of occurring. A heavy and prolonged rainfall had come very late in the present spring, and the insolence of this *parvenu* Shifter had literally and littorally known no bounds, either artificial or otherwise. The principal stone bridge had been hurled away as though built of pasteboard, and a fourth of the estate was under water.

'Nota quæ fuerit,' etc.

I forgot, Latin is vulgar, but the old poet says that the unaccustomed trout didn't quite know what to do with himself among the branches, which he had hitherto understood to be the private residence of the exclusive dove.

For a long time it was no use to talk or even to think of what was to be done; indeed, fully three weeks elapsed before the

river resumed anything like, not its former, but any shape whatever, and then it gradually made its reappearance much enlarged and altered in its geography. New wise men, and more of them, were summoned, and they sat in solemn conclave upon the rebel, and showed themselves bitterly severe upon everything that the poor former wise men had said and done. For themselves, they would say nothing whatever under a month's cogitation and calculation; they would give no word of opinion or advice until all the estimates should be made out and beautifully copied, and all the plans traced and elegantly tinted in water-colours.

All this time poor Lord Craigietoun was like a cockchafer on a string. Week after week went by, and he began to wonder if the eminent firm of engineers he employed were ever going to vouchsafe him any knowledge of his own affairs, when, just the day before his wife's ball—an event which somehow had the effect of annually unhinging him—the budget arrived.

Far be it from me to analyse its mysterious contents. Suffice it now to say what was

its upshot. Divested of technicalities and circumlocution, it amounted to this—Lord Craigietoun was calmly informed that he might take his choice between laying out three thousand pounds on the one hand, and seeing half his estate gradually but surely transforming itself into a lake on the other.

It was while his lordship was in the first flush of his irritaton from the above unreasonable behaviour of the elements that we find him grimly perambulating his wife's ball-room, and inwardly swearing against such a *fête* being given at all, and, if given, against its being done in so lavish and extensive à style.

'As if you must turn your house into a garden—shrubberies and all,' he muttered

A little dance he thought had been far more becoming in people of their time of life, and having no daughters to produce and barter away. But—

'The cry is still they come.'

As the rooms grew hotter and more crowded, so his august temper waxed more and more 'ugly' as Blanche Astor would have termed it. He looked upon each new ar-

rival as a new enemy—good for another bottle of champagne. Vulgar, was it not? but, alas! true. Perhaps he had been too much injured by water lately to be able to part recklessly with his wine.

Just as some such thought was present to his aristocratic brain, whom should he think he saw at half-a-dozen paces off but Basil Armfield!

'That fellow here!' he inwardly exclaimed; 'impossible!' However, he rubbed his double eye-glass with his glove, set it riding on his very Scotch nose, and saw that there could be no sort of doubt upon the subject.

'I should like to know,' he cogitated. 'I should particularly like to know who asked him. After the very strong manner in which I have thought it my duty to speak to my Lady George about this penniless nobody—I cannot believe she would have the impudence—or can my wife have been so absurd as to—I'll ask her.'

And off he went in search of his better half. Lady Craigietoun, however, had left her post of reception before the arrival of the Polwhele party, and was enjoying her

fête after her own fashion; utterly ignorant of Basil's presence, she was wandering from room to room, exchanging airy nothings with every one she met.

With some little difficulty her husband ran her down in the conservatory.

'How comes that Mr Armfield to be here, Margaret?'

'He is not here that I know of.'

'I have just seen him.'

'Nonsense, you're so blind; you mistake some one else for him. Lord Fairlocks has a great look—'

'Don't talk d—d rubbish, Margaret. I tell you he's there. Now, who asked him if you didn't?'

'I don't know.'

'But I *will* know.'

'No one can have asked him, as I didn't. Either Julia brought him—'

'Which I should call an infernal piece of impertinence—'

'So should I,' said her ladyship. 'Or else he's come without being asked at all. It's a trick often played, and he's just the sort of nobody to do it.'

'By gad, I'll not stand it. I'll—I'll—I'll just go and charge Julia with bringing him, and if she didn't, I'll—I'll—'

'Turn him out!' said his wife, valiantly.

'Eh!'

'Turn him out!'

'I'll tell him to go—'

'Well, isn't that turning him out?'

'Don't be absurd and haggle about terms; when a man's told to walk out of a drawing-room, he doesn't generally compel you to send for the police.'

By this time they had reached the landing-place, and whom should they meet plump, now coming upstairs for the first time, but gentle Lady George herself. So intent were host and hostess upon what they had in hand, that they forgot to give her anything like a greeting. It was Lord Craigietoun's way never to speak when he could get his wife to speak for him—Lady Craigietoun now pounced upon her sister-in-law, and with more than her habitual harsh manner said,—

'Did you bring Mr Basil Armfield?'

'Oh, he is here?' said Lady George, her face assuming at once a pleased expression.

'I say, did you bring him, or invite him?' persisted her examiner.

'Ay, *did* you?' echoed my lord.

'No; I came alone, and invited no one. After what has passed you can scarcely believe it likely that I—'

'You are quite sure?' asked the host and hostess together, staggered, but still incredulous.

'Quite,' said Lady George.

It was so much more likely that, of the two, she had brought him after all, rather than that any man—even a penniless nobody—should come uninvited, that they both seemed only half convinced.

It so happened that Lady Craigietoun, who with her national shrewdness generally knew what she was about, had on this occasion given leave to no earthly soul to bring any one without a card to her ball, save and except Mrs Polwhele, who chanced to be just then in especially high favour. Now, some ten minutes before her husband had joined her, she had come upon Mrs Polwhele and Miss Astor, these two having got separated by that time from the rest of their party.

Mrs Polwhele had availed herself of the *carte blanche* accorded to her to bring two men besides Basil—our friend the cornet, and a certain young Lord Hemford, of whom no doubt she was somewhat proud to be the introducer, seeing that he was heir to an earldom and thirty thousand a-year, and yet fortunately did not happen to know the Craigietouns.

It was of course her intention, as it was her duty, to present her *protégés* to her noble hostess on the first opportunity, and meanwhile to acquaint her with their styles and titles in full. But the fact was, that poor Mrs Polwhele, who had inevitably begun with her young lord, found his styles and titles so many, and his virtues and graces so pleasant to dwell upon, that she had not nearly got to her number two or three, when her *catalogue raisonnée* was suddenly cut short by the arrival of a duchess.

At the present moment, however, Lady Craigietoun only remembered that she had conversed for some minutes with the privileged Polwhele; that that lady had informed her whom she had brought, and that no

word had ever been said of Armfield, whom, moreover, she was not aware that Mrs Polwhele was well acquainted with.

Leaving Lady George as unceremoniously as they had accosted her, the couple, now more enraged than ever, sought once more the retreat of the conservatory, in dread confabulation to shape forth the fire which burnt in their celestial minds. The slighted sister-in-law, however, took in the situation at a glance, and it required not the tithe of her quick perception to see that danger, and that of a most disagreeable kind, threatened the man who—well, the man for whom she entertained at any rate the loyal and warm regard of a true friend. What was to be done? Warn him? Perhaps. But a woman's actions are far less free in a crowded ball-room than a man's. Her dress and her sex render it much more difficult to move about, and to find any particular person, even if they have the advantage of being 'more than common tall,' as was this lady-champion of Basil's.

Could she reach him in time? Might he not be dancing with some one else at the

moment? Should she entrust the mission to one of her male friends, and if so, what manner of message should she send? Even if she should chance to come upon Basil wandering alone at this very moment, what could she tell him of the subject which engrossed her thoughts, without wounding him to the very quick, and perhaps uselessly after all?

For did she not know that whatever rude speech Lord or Lady Craigietoun might venture to make to Basil, it was most certainly undeserved, and that he could not fail to right himself in an instant? That, in short, there could by no possibility be more in the matter than a mistake—a misunderstanding of a moment, and this being so, was it not probable that the error had, even in the short interval which had elapsed since her relatives had so brusquely addressed her, been already dispelled?

While these thoughts coursed one another through her brain, Lady George had continued slowly to make her way up the densely packed staircase, and had now reached the top. She had scarcely done so, when she

was passed by a man who was rather rudely pushing his hurried way through the crowd.

It was Lord Craigietoun; his looks black as thunder, and evidently impelled by some feeling strong enough to render him somewhat forgetful of even a scanty allowance of courtliness and good manners.

To speak to him in such a mood were useless, but she profited by the opening he made in the brilliant throng to follow in his wake as well as she could.

Basil Armfield, all unmindful of the coming storm, was thoroughly enjoying himself to-night; yielding to the charm of the hour, and succeeding admirably in utterly banishing from his mind, for the time being, every one of those various sources of sorrow and ennui of which all human creatures have their share more or less. He had danced without intermission ever since his arrival; danced with the siren, who, for the moment at least, was bewitching his every sense. He had not been to look for Lady George, for the time being almost seemed to have forgotten her very existence, but devoted himself to Miss Blanche Astor in

a fierce, passionate way that Basil Armfield was not wont to indulge in. Blanche Astor was more amused than flattered, she was so used to homage that she ended by failing to see any compliment in it. Mr Armfield suited her until a *parti* asked her to dance the next quadrille, when of course she accepted him and left Basil, a little disconcerted, to look out for another partner.

He was not long in finding one, and stood up in the quadrille in process of formation, with a pretty and very smart lady indeed, to whom he had been introduced a few minutes before, and who naturally knew nothing of the circumstances under which he had come. Judge of the consternation of this careless pair when up to them strode the master of the house, looking like concentrated essence of thunder cloud.

'Mr Armfield, I think?'

'Yes,' said Basil.

'A word, if you please—' He did add to the lady, 'Excuse me, madam, one moment.'

But he only moved off a step, so that, by half turning, Basil could speak to him

without leaving his partner. Lord Craigietoun, however, whether intentionally or not, spoke out in his anger in a pitch that at once procured him an audience composed of every one in that part of the room.

'Do you happen, Mr Armfield, to be able to produce any card or invitation of my lady's? Because—'

But here Basil cut him short. As has been said he had had a few extra glasses of wine to-night, and although this would in no way be observable as long as things went favourably with him, the moment any extraordinary event should arise, a difference, and not for the better, would be certain to appear.

It so happened that he did not know his host by sight, — and was wholly ignorant, both of what he looked like and of his old-time, north-country way and customs. Seeing a respectable elderly individual arrive on the scene, apparently charged with some message of life and death, and, moreover, hearing him make use of such terms as madam and milady, it is perhaps not so very strange that he fell into an unfortunate mis-

take. He interrupted him then with great *hauteur*, his face meanwhile paling at the bare mention of an invitation.

'No, I cannot. Are you the butler?'

'You—you impudent knave! How dare you insult me in my own house? But what's to be expected from a fellow who sneaks in uninvited?'

'Lord Craigietoun, if you be he, you had better inquire what the facts are before you degrade yourself by insulting your guest.'

'Guest, indeed! Did you not just now own you were not asked?'

'I said I had no card.'

'Have you not this instant grossly insulted me?'

'And have you not, my lord, far more grossly—'

'Leave my house!'

'Be sure I will, but not till—'

'Leave my house, or I'll send for the police.'

There was now a regular ring formed, and not a sound but the voices of the two men was to be heard. Even the band, though in full career, had stopped playing.

As ill-luck would have it, Mrs Polwhele, the only person who might possibly have cleared matters up, was down in the tea-room. But as so often happens in quarrels, the real bone of contention or original question had now been aggravated a hundred-fold by the offensive language to which it had given rise, and on this account it is more than doubtful whether even that lady's presence would particularly have modified the scandalous state of affairs.

When this threat of 'police' fell upon poor Basil's astonished ear, it had the effect of stunning him for the moment. He stopped short to ask himself whether he were awake or asleep.

Was he, Basil Armfield, really standing there being blackguarded by a noble marquis for entering his house uninvited, or in other words as a pickpocket or sneak and thief?

Such was the situation. He stood there apparently cowed.

Lord Craigietoun, drawn up to the full height of his six feet, seemed to tower above him morally as well as bodily, as he still

pointed implacably to the door. The alarm had spread, and hundreds were now eagerly struggling both to hear and see. There was the pause of a second.

Two.

Three.

Then a fair and stately woman advanced into the centre of the clear space —into this verbal pugilistic ring, and her sweet, clear voice rang out distinctly amid the all-pervading silence,—

'Mr Armfield, will you take me to my carriage?'

Turning, he beheld Lady George, who quietly took his arm as if unconscious that anything worth notice had happened. The crowd parted to let them pass, and they left the ball-room and the house together.

CHAPTER XII.

RUINED PEACE.

POOR Mercy—poor little brave heart!

With true, silent, unobtrusive heroism she sought to make the best of the evil life into which fate had cast her; for it was an evil life, and that Mercy had discovered before she had been married a fortnight.

One or two remarks which men who had come to see Jim had let fall showed her all too plainly, though she made no sign, that hanky-panky tricks and nefarious transactions were not altogether out of her husband's line of business. She did not learn much, not every detail, for Jim stopped the conversation whenever outside subjects were

alluded to as soon as he could, to the no small surprise of his associates; but how could they be expected to guess that an angel of purity and virtue, as Mercy was, had come to dwell in that drear shop, where tobacco and snuff were only blinds, and which, even in Mrs Waggs' time, had been known as a rendezvous for reprobates of every class.

Mercy had heard enough, though, to make her throw her apron over her head when Jim was not by, and cry as if her poor honest heart would break.

'She could not believe that Jim was really bad; he had only got hedged in by a set of wicked people,' she thought. 'Ah, if she could only get him out of it! Perhaps that was why God had let her marry him!'

How many another woman has argued, with variations, from the same theory, refusing to believe that the man who is her all in life can be as bad as his associates in iniquity!

Tears, however, Mercy soon told herself, were of little avail, if she wished to be of

any practical benefit. They only wasted her time when Jim was absent, and she dared not have let him see them when he was present. She would set pluckily and steadily to her work of reform, and begin by seeing that the shop was properly stocked and the customers civilly waited on. This latter duty generally devolved on her, as Jim was so continually away from home. He never told Mercy what business took him out so frequently, but she had dark suspicions, though she could not have put them into words; for the curious odds and ends of talk she had picked up did not reveal all the truth, only she had heard about 'ejectments—press him hard and he'll pay up to save the blab—got a child she's no business with, and now refuses to pay my missus to keep it dark,' etc., etc.

These and such as these were the phrases that tortured Mercy's mind, and set her wondering. For a week, however, after she began to take things into her own hands, no one came near the shop who uttered any remarks likely to annoy Mercy. She had got a tidy, respectable woman as a lodger

—at least so she hoped; and though Jim was always out, she managed with her tobacco-selling pretty well. A rough customer would come in sometimes, whose language would raise a blush to her cheek, but Mercy tutored herself into regarding these unpleasantnesses as the little crosses of life, and went bravely on, only hoping that Jim would give up every other mode of existence when once he saw how their legitimate business paid.

He, meanwhile, noted Mercy's energy, and smiled.

If she could get a livelihood out of tobacco, so much the better for her, he thought; it would keep her employed, and prevent her from worrying over what he was about. Jim's one object was to keep Mercy in the dark, not because he feared her tongue—he knew full well that she was staunch and silent—but because he loved her, and did not wish to pain her more than was necessary, at the same time not caring to receive those upbraiding glances from her dear honest eyes, which seemed to penetrate into his very soul.

But Mercy's hopefulness that things under her influence might mend was very short-lived, a worse discovery was in store for her than any she had yet encountered.

She had shut up the shop, late though tobacconists in low neighbourhoods are usually kept open—the clock was striking twelve, and she felt very lonely.

'Where can Jim be?' she asked herself over and over again, for he had gone out at eight in the morning and had not yet returned. Shall she sally forth and look for him? She did not know where to go, London was so large, and her knowledge of his haunts so limited; so she sat down behind the counter, a dim flicker of gas burning over her head. She did not cry, she was too frightened, for the place was fearfully dreary; there was not a creature stirring, no one in the house but the one lodger, who was asleep, and her anxiety about Jim was very great. At last there came a great thudding bang against the closed door.

Mercy started to her feet and ran forward to open it.

Not Jim, but a woman!

'Susan Ford! Why, whatever has brought you here at this time of the night, Susan? You have not got anything dreadful to tell me about Jim?'

Susan, without speaking, turned up the gas and looked full at Mercy's blanched face. It was the first time they had met since Mercy's marriage.

'So you married him after all,' Susan said, with a sort of sneer. 'I wonder whether you thought you'd be happy?'

'You surely haven't come here at this 'ere time o' the night to twit me about Jim? Tell me at once whatever has brought you.'

'Come and see.'

'What do you mean?' cried poor Mercy; 'tell me, for God's sake, what has happened.'

'Oh! you need not call out in that fierce kind of way. Though he is your husband, I shouldn't think you'd go on caring about him long. Get your bonnet and wrap, and come along of me.'

Without farther talk Mercy caught up a bonnet and shawl which were lying close

at hand, turned the key in the shop door, and followed her into the silent street. She did not even ask her where she was going, but trudged on after her at a brisk pace, something very like despair lying cold and heavy at her heart.

Mercy had been a good deal tried during the last few weeks; perhaps her nerves were easily shaken, and she felt as though she were on the threshold of some great and terrible calamity.

After walking for about five minutes, Mercy, too absorbed by her own thoughts to care or heed in the least where she was going, Susan stopped at the door of the identical tavern where Captain Denis and Jim were in the habit of meeting.

It was past the Parliamentary closing hour, and was then of course shut up; but Susan knocked at the door with her knuckles, and it was immediately opened by that high priest of Bacchus, Ben Haller himself.

Mercy shuddered when she saw him as he stood there, the light from a candle he held in his hand shining full on his repul-

sive countenance, whereon was gleaming a fiendish satyr-like grin.

'Come in, ladies,' he said, with a sort of mock courtesy which made his coarseness only the more apparent; 'come in and see a live lion stuffed with straw.'

Susan began to giggle, but Mercy turned away as she asked faintly,—

'Where is Jim?'

'There.'

Yes, it was the same scene from which Denis had turned revolted away, in the earlier part of the day, which Susan, in the fulness of her jealous anger over his marriage, had brought the young wife to see, masking her unkindness under the garb of that friendship which suggested that he had better be taken home and looked after.

How did Susan know he was there?

Had not Captain Denis, fearful lest Jim, during some of his drunken bouts, might reveal some part of the mystery about little Dandy, decided that he would himself send Mrs Ford and the boy away from the scene of action for a time. Susan of course was made his *confidante*, and no sooner was she

made *au fait* of the whole story, having insidiously wormed every detail out of the captain, than she started off for the low beer shop, resolving to see for herself the state in which Jim was lying there.

As she stood and looked at him, while she exchanged rough jokes with Ben Haller—for Susan, notwithstanding her exceeding gentility, was not easily shocked, or above the indulgence in a coarse jest when she was in society that appreciated it—the feeling of revenge which had been lying dormant of late suddenly awoke.

She would fetch Mercy, and startle the young wife out of her love for Jim, by letting her see him as the beast he was. Who knows but that she might thus be the means of parting them, and perhaps regain all her own influence over him.

Susan did not care about his drinking propensities—not she, though she was quite acute enough to know that Mercy's more delicate organisation would be revolted at the sight.

Strange that, in outward appearance, Susan was by far the more lady-like and gentle

looking, yet in character the two girls entirely changed places.

Mercy stood looking for a second or two, as Ben Haller turned and held the light above Jim as he lay on the floor, in a heavy drunken slumber—then she gave a bitter cry.

'Is he ill or dead?' she asked.

Ben Haller set up a shout of laughter.

She looked at him angrily, then knelt down beside Jim.

'I had best take him home at once,' she said.

Mercy was a daughter of the people, she did not want much telling as to what was the matter with her husband.

'It will have to be on a stretcher then,' observed Ben, 'for he'll not get out of that thar sleep for hours.'

Mercy, however, put her arm about his neck and tried to awaken him, but with no avail; the power of alcohol was stronger than her will.

'What shall I do? What shall I do?' she asked piteously, as she sat in the dirty unwashed tavern floor and looked from Jim's

puffed stupefied countenance into the landlord's blotched repulsive face, and then back again at Jim.

'Leave him till the morning; he won't want no mindin'; he'll sleep like a baby till long past cock-crow.'

'What, go away and leave him here?'

Mercy thought of the desolate tobacconist's shop, and how miserable and forlorn she should be there all alone.

She set her back against the wall as she sat on the floor, untied her bonnet and laid it in her lap, and said very quietly,—

'Please, sir, I'd rather stay here if you'll allow me, and when Jim wakes I can take him home. He is my husband, you know.'

'Well, Mercy, you are a fool to—' began Susan, but the landlord interrupted her. He did not see many women like Mercy among his abandoned customers, and dropping the bantering tone in which he had hitherto spoken, he said,—

'Let her bide here if she pleases; nobody won't come a-nigh the place till the boy comes to open the shutters in the morning, and that

won't be afore seven—this yere is a late business.'

'I sha'n't stop,' decided Susan.

'No, I s'pose not—you ain't the wife.'

'Thank the Lord.'

But Mercy took no notice of any of their remarks. She sat on there very quietly gazing at Jim, and did not even say 'good-night' to Susan when, after once more trying to entice her away with her, she at last turned to depart.

Ben Haller set the tallow candle he had been holding down on a table in the corner. It would burn for an hour or two, the nights were not long; then he threw a coarse rug over Mercy's shoulders, pulled up the blind of a back window, so as to let in the first streaks of dawn, and at last, almost on tiptoe, went into the inner part of the house and left her to herself.

She took no notice of him—to all appearance scarcely knew who he was—yet the sight of her silent misery seemed to have humanised him at all events for a time.

If Job could have seen her as she sat there during the silent hours watching Jim!

She never moved, but remained there as one stupefied, rendered so partly by her horror at the scene, partly by the fumes of liquor with which the place reeked, and to which Mercy was wholly unaccustomed. About six o'clock Jim turned over, and she spoke to him very softly, but he took no notice of her, so she got up, opened the back window, of which Ben Haller had pulled up the blind, and drank in gratefully the fresh air, coming though it did through densely peopled alleys. Then she turned about and looked for some cold water; she found a tap where glasses were rinsed at the corner of the shop; she let it run and steeped her handkerchief, then, kneeling beside Jim once more, she began to bathe his head. After a minute or two he opened his eyes and looked at her. He had well-nigh slept out his sleep, and the cold water had the effect of thoroughly awaking him.

'What is it?' he asked stupidly.

'Oh, get up, Jim, and let us go away from here.'

He leant upon his arm and looked round.

'Why, Mercy, what the devil are you doing here?'

'Come away, come away,' was all she could repeat, as she hastily tied on her bonnet and held out her hand to help him to rise.

She did not attempt to find fault with him, or to tell him what she thought. She had but one object—to get away from there; but Jim did not seem in any hurry to move. He laid himself down again and stared at her once more. He could not understand, and he was evidently waiting for her to tell him what it all meant. Entreaties, however, were all he got from Mercy, entreaties that he would come home at once. He did not seem very capable of holding any conversation or in fact of even answering her; but at last, with her assistance, he managed to drag himself on to his feet, and then only stood gazing in a sleepish sort of way. She opened one of the front shutters to let in some more light, and, after looking about for a while, she found his hat and gave it to him. Finally, having unlocked the door she led him out, he passively submitting to her wishes as though he were a little child.

With but few words spoken between them, they reached home just as the milk-woman and the baker and various other hawkers of daily necessities were crying their comestibles in the street—the buying and selling of these articles in the neighbourhood where the Burritts lived being conducted upon very different principles from similar transactions in the grand squares of the west end. Small profits and quick returns being the established custom of the street vendor, while it is only now creeping into usage in the magnificent co-operative stores of the rich.

When Mercy saw her neighbours popping out, one after the other for their halfpenny worth's of milk and their fourpence farthing's worth of bread, she felt the blush of shame tingling her cheeks.

'What must they think of her and Jim coming home in the dilapidated condition in which they both were at that hour in the morning?'

She opened the door quickly without saying good-day, seeking, as it were, under silence to hide herself from inquisitive glances, then she almost pushed Jim into the shop,

and going in after him she threw herself on the first chair and burst out crying.

Pent-up nature could endure no more. Jim sat down and looked at her, by degrees an almost savagely, brutal expression developing itself on his hitherto stolidly stupid face. Susan had instinctively argued wisely when she took Mercy to watch Jim in his state of bestial degradation. She knew the truth now; he had been hiding it from her for months. Now, it mattered little what he did, since she knew the worst, and was never likely again to have any respect for him or to regard him in any other light than that of a drunken brute. The only thing that would ever have kept Jim straight in life was trying to appear so, in order to please Mercy—now the veil had rudely been torn from her eyes, no matter what befel!

In such a strain the thoughts surged through his rapidly clearing brain, then at last he brought his doubled fist down on the counter with an oath, such an oath as made Mercy suddenly stop crying and jump up in horrified alarm.

'Get the breakfast instead of sitting whim-

pering there,' he thundered. 'I'll teach you to come sneaking after me. If you'd mind your own business and make a man's home comfortable when he comes to it, it would be more like your duty; but such blessed saints as you pretend to be are always sneaks.'

Mercy did not answer him, but she looked very white as though she was going to faint. She managed, however, by clutching hold of the various articles near her to get into the back-room, where, like one in a dream, she lighted the fire and set the kettle on to boil. When the breakfast was ready she called him, and they partook of it together, that is they drank some tea, for neither of them attempted to eat, and if Susan Ford could have looked in at the window, how truly would she have rejoiced over her work.

The spirit of distrust and misery was indeed stalking, gaunt and haggard, between them, never perchance in this world to be removed. Jim did not go out all that day; but his presence afforded Mercy but little pleasure. Although the day was warm and the weather bright, he sat close to the fire, watching it as though seeking to read the

mysteries of the future among the burning coals. She made no effort to rouse him, but attended to the customers who came in as well as she could, though it was in vain for her to attempt to conceal the heavy hand which had fallen on her bright young life.

Towards evening, however, she could stand it no longer, and she went and knelt down beside Jim—he was her husband, and she loved him after all. She laid her soft pink cheek against his face, but she did not get the usual loving kiss or cheery, 'Well, Mercy, lass,' in return. Jim was thoroughly ashamed of himself, and being so, was resolved to lay all the blame on Mercy. She fought him valiantly, however, with woman's strongest weapon—love—and after a while she softened him somewhat, and he put his arm round her.

Mercy having gained a step, grew brighter. Though she had learned a fearful truth, all hope was not yet dead within her, nor all chance of reclaiming him quite lost. Ay, truly, if love and tact could do it, the will would not be wanting.

She made no allusion to what had happened, but sitting on the floor at his feet, she began to chat to him as though no ghost stood between them, trying by her prattle to make him forget that they had ever seen one. To a degree she succeeded, for Jim, though not wholly attentive, yet listened and answered, and at last he grew almost interested as she chatted away, when by the merest accident she stumbled on to the subject of Lady George Heriot, for whom she used to iron fine things in those happy days before she married, and at last she alluded to the sad loss of Lady George's little boy. Then Jim thrust her away from him almost as roughly as he had done in the morning, and getting up suddenly began to walk up and down the room. Poor Mercy, how her heart failed her, as she thought she had lost all the ground she had but just gained.

In a few seconds Jim sat down again.

'Go on,' he said, striving to look pleasant, 'tell me all about these people and what you did there; they lost a little boy, you say.'

Mercy, making a tremendous effort over herself, told him the whole story as far as she knew it.

He did not speak when she had finished, but once more rising he took his hat from a peg.

'Are you going out, Jim?'

A vision of Ben Haller's beer house rose in painful reality before Mercy's mind.

'Ay. There is some business I must attend to. I shall be back in half-an-hour.'

'I wonder if he will. I'll get some nice supper ready in case he comes,' murmured the heart-stricken wife after he left her. It was eleven o'clock though when Jim came in, and he had gone out at eight. The beef sausages Mercy had cooked, and then tried to keep warm, were rather like cinders—he ate them though without grumbling. He was thoroughly sober, but his head was full of many thoughts. He had been to Vale Street, and had a tempestuous interview with Susan; it was not that, however, which troubled him; but Mrs Ford and the child were gone, and Susan declined to tell him whither.

CHAPTER XIII.

'I CANNOT INTERFERE.'

BASIL ARMFIELD'S intended *vis-à-vis* in the quadrille, the formation of which was so ruthlessly interrupted by the arrival of Lord Craigietoun, was Miss Blanche Astor, and the *parti* for whom she had a momentary intention of angling.

Miss Astor's object was if possible to make him as thoroughly the slave of her charms as she had rendered Basil. Intent on this, she had not noticed what was passing, and it was not till the music struck up and the dancing was about to begin that she observed Basil with Lady George on his arm, making for the door as rapidly as the crowd would permit,

while the pretty little girl who was to have danced with him stood alone looking exceedingly bewildered and frightened. Lord Craigietoun was so angry that he had forgotten to have the common courtesy of conducting her to a seat, after depriving her of her good-looking partner.

'What is the matter?' asked Miss Astor of her cavalier. 'I guess some one is—'

He did not know, and the inquiry was passed on.

'Armfield has been turned out for coming without an invitation,' said a man who was standing near.

'Mr Armfield given the sack—nonsense, you are joking,' cried Blanche.

'It is true though, his lordship is foaming with fury, and there has been a regular row.'

'But Mrs Polwhele brought Mr Armfield. Where is she? Do you indulge in practical jokes this side of the Atlantic, and bring a man to a ball simply to make a fool of him? Anyhow Mr Armfield is far too beautiful to be served so.'

'I daresay it is all about something we

don't understand,' lisped the *parti;* 'let us finish the quadrille—another *vis-à-vis* has arrived—then we will try and get some more information.'

If he had not been a *parti*, Miss Astor would not have consented; but self-interest was stronger in her nature than any she took in the handsome detrimental with whom she had been flirting for the last four hours.

By the time the quadrille was over the storm had lulled, that is all the conflicting elements had separated, and the chance Blanche Astor might have had of putting matters straight was gone.

Never again, in all probability, would the same knot of people who had heard the quarrel between Lord Craigietoun and Basil be assembled together on the same spot.

'Let us go and look for Mrs Polwhele,' she suggested to her partner. But Mrs Polwhele was not readily found. She was in the supper-room, which at this period was crammed, and not being a very big woman, she was not easily discernible in the crowd.

Once more Miss Astor made the circuit

of the rooms, not altogether sorry to have more time in which to avail herself of the opportunity of making herself fascinating to her partner who, she had been assured, on good authority, was heir to ten thousand a-year.

Blanche Astor expected a richer and nobler match; but she was too shrewd and far-seeing ever to let a single chance escape her. Of lovers she said she had plenty, of rich ones but few.

The head of this *parti* was not, however, easily turned, and she was just about to give up the whole affair in disgust, when she saw Mrs Polwhele toiling up the staircase with a venerable peer who frequently dined in Cromwell Road.

Blanche Astor had been bottling up her curiosity too long, was too annoyed with her apathetic cavalier, whose indifference made her each moment increase even to exaggeration her belief in Basil's devotion, for her to stand on many forms of ceremony and etiquette. She pounced on Mrs Polwhele at once, and asked with an extra amount of nasal twang if she were aware 'that that

beautiful dove-eyed Armfield had been turned bodily out of the place?'

Mrs Polwhele thought she had suddenly gone mad, as well she might.

Anyone turned out, a disturbance in that grand, well-organised establishment. The thing was past belief.

Wherefore, too—what had he done?

'Come without a printed form-plate,' said the girl, using odd terms as she grew excited, 'and it's all my fault. I asked you to bring him, Mrs Polwhele. I thought you were omnipotent. Whoever dreamt of swells as these Craigietouns are behaving like common cads? I'm thinking of being off—shall be turned out next myself.'

The peer looked at Miss Astor with admiration; she appeared handsomer than ever in her indignation, while, as for Mrs Polwhele, she was too utterly aghast to do anything but gasp convulsively.

'Mr Armfield,' at last she muttered, when, after a second or two the words came very disjointedly and incoherently,—'Mr Armfield—you say—gone! Where—where is Lady Craigietoun?'

Miss Astor shrugged her shoulders.

'All the Lady Craigietouns in Europe can't put together a smashed egg, nor yet set anyone right again after such a thrust as this. Why, the whole room is ringing with it. Wherever have your ears been? As I said before, the sooner we move out of this house the better. I have had enough of such ways. Give me a plain missis. I wonder where my chaperone is—no bother about chaperones in the States, and better manners.'

'Wait till I've found Lady Craigietoun,' begged Mrs Polwhele; 'there must be some explanation to this curious story.'

'All right, come on. I don't mind seeing the end of the fun, if you think you are likely to finish off the swells.'

The two gentlemen in attendance on these ladies did not speak, for at that moment Lady Craigietoun came suddenly upon them from a side door, a very gracious smile on her lips.

'Dear Mrs Polwhele, I have not had a word with you this evening. I hope you have been well taken care of. Ah! I see

Lord Blanchard has been looking after you.'

Miss Astor gave a little sniff and tossed her beautiful head. Lady Craigietoun's caressing tones irritated her.

Mrs Polwhele cast a reproving glance and then spoke very quietly.

'I was just coming to look for you to ask about Mr Armfield.'

Lady Craigietoun's face became crimson, whether from anger or shame was doubtful

'What do you want to know about him?' she inquired, all the dulcet tones in her voice giving place to the sharpest and most vinegarish accent.

'I hear Lord Craigietoun has sent him away.'

'He came without an invitation.'

'I brought him. You gave me permission to bring—'

'You!'

And her ladyship's voice almost reached a scream as she uttered the monosyllable, which was a climax to all the annoyance she had had on the subject of Basil Armfield. In a moment she saw that she had

put herself in a false position, and, diplomat though she was, the way out of it was by no means clear. With true womanly instinct, she at once proceeded to place Mrs Polwhele in the wrong.

'Why did you not tell me? You told me about Lord Hemford. You might have saved a great deal of trouble.'

'Why, indeed!' echoed Mrs Polwhele, annoyed with herself; 'but how could I ever imagine that a guest would be turned out?'

'There are reasons why I particularly object to receive Mr Armfield. If you had told me you were going to bring him, I should have requested you not to do so.'

'Mr Armfield! oh, I am so sorry. He is quite a favourite of mine. I hoped to make him one of yours. Dear Lady Craigietoun, you cannot think how I regret all this. What can we do to make reparation?'

Lady Craigietoun shrugged her shoulders. She was a gentlewoman it is true, but still she almost hoped that no reparation could be made—that the affront which had been

offered to Basil might have the effect of exterminating him altogether, and that she at least would never hear of him again.

'I must speak to my lord,' she said.

My lord, in this instance, meaning Captain Denis, whom she saw on the staircase, and from whom she anticipated gaining more practical counsel than from his lordship, who, the first brush of his anger against Basil being over, would, she knew, devote all his thoughts to the suppression of the uncontrollable Shifter, and the mode in which he could raise the necessary funds for working future agricultural successes.

'It's real mean not to do something,' cried Miss Astor, 'and the only possible reparation that can be made to Mr Armfield is to whistle him back, though if he has any spirit he will be as deaf as a mummy.'

Lady Craigietoun gave the young American a crushing bow, and informed her with much courtesy that she would consider the matter and settle it judiciously. Having delivered herself of this determination in rounded terms, she swept on. It was

evident she did not wish for any farther discussion on the subject.

Miss Astor told the American minister's wife that Mrs Polwhele would set her down at home, for she had had enough of a ball where blue-blood behaved like a shoe-black, and so the two ladies, in whose good favour Lady Craigietoun had fallen considerably during the last half-hour, took their departure together—Lady Craigietoun, meanwhile, seeking an immediate interview with Captain Denis, who had been in the card-room, and had as yet heard nothing of the evening's scandal. He put on a very serious and annoyed look when she told him. If he had only been consulted earlier, such a thing would never have happened. Granted that he objected strongly to Basil Armfield being invited to this ball; but once there, by whatever means, he would not have had him turned out for the world. Why, all London would be ringing with it in a few hours. It would be in all the society papers. Basil Armfield would pose for a martyr, and everybody would throw a pebble at Lord and Lady Craigietoun, who were not popular, but

only suffered because they held a highly fashionable position.

This is the sum total of the thoughts that chased one another rapidly through Captain Denis' mind as Lady Craigietoun told her tale. Having finished, she asked his advice as to what she should do.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Remain passive and wait the issue of circumstances. It's just possible that Armfield may not dare to ask you for an apology. If he does not do so it is unnecessary for you to tender one.'

'I knew some horribly annoying thing would happen about that Mr Armfield. If you had seen my Lady George sailing off downstairs with her arm in his. Curious how much some women delight in *afficher*ing themselves. Very bad style I call it.'

Captain Denis opened his usually half-closed eyes and looked at her.

'If she were only half as good style as Lady George,' he thought, 'she would have much to be thankful for, marchioness though she was.'

Denis lived in an atmosphere of plots

and counter-plots, but he gave the palm of preference to a gentle, noble woman, who soared far above the sullying mysteries of intrigue; preferring her infinitely to Lady Craigietoun while he was damaging her the most.

'Then there is that horrible American hoyden all you men think so handsome. She has chosen to take up the cudgels and call me to account for my behaviour to, I presume, her last new flirtation.'

'Miss Blanche Astor; is she flirting with Armfield?'

'I don't know; only she seemed very warm in his defence.'

'Such a flirtation should be encouraged to the utmost. Nothing will make Lady George see this young adventurer in his true light so quickly as the discovery that another woman has attractions in his eyes.'

'I really cannot interfere with the matter any farther. I do not seem to have been at all successful in what I have already done. Nor do I particularly care whether Lady George is or is not devoted to this Mr Armfield, as long as he does not come

here. If she is ridiculous enough to marry him, she will find our door shut in her face as well as in his. We only tolerate her now on poor George's account. Such an act on her part would put her quite outside the family pale.'

Farther communication between these two evil spirits was at this moment put a stop to by some *parvenus*—tolerated by Lady Craigietoun on account of their excessive financial influence—coming up to compliment her on the success of her ball, and wish her good-night, or rather good-morning. They had but lately audaciously rattled their money-bags on the door-steps of society, and been admitted without a novitiate within its sacred portals. To make their exit from any house to which they had been invited *à l'Anglaise*, as the French call our habit of creeping away from large parties unobserved, would have been deemed by these people the acme of rudeness.

If they could only have guessed how the Marchioness of Craigietoun, even while she smiled, sneered at their want of *savoir-faire*, and wished them at that moment at the

farthest end of Bloomsbury or Islington, or whatever the horrible locality was from which they had sprung, they would scarcely have felt flattered.

During this short colloquy Denis had taken the opportunity to pass on. He had heard all Lady Craigietoun had to tell him anent this business. He would wander among the crowd still left in the ball-room, and feel the pulse of public opinion. He was right in his conjecture; the story of Basil Armfield's expulsion was on every lip, and as Denis, with quiet step and silent tongue, moved bowing to his acquaintances slowly about the rooms, many were the varied accounts he heard of the event of the evening.

He was just passing down the staircase on his way out when he saw a pale cadaverous-looking man leaning against the conservatory door.

He was the editor of the *Libeller*, a society paper in great vogue. He was not an intimate acquaintance of Captain Denis, still he knew him quite well enough to stop and have a chat with him.

Perhaps at that particular moment there was not any one whom Denis would more gladly have met than this melancholy editor.

'More excitement about this ball than most of its stereotyped sisters,' he said, going up to him. 'How glad you must be to get a subject out of a ball, beyond toilettes and the pairings of the guests.'

'I have only been here ten minutes, but I hear some one has been turned out. I was waiting for Percy Blackman, who always knows all the gossip, to tell me about it.'

'I'll tell you—got it from Lady Craigietoun herself. Armfield, a young upstart, who is in some red tape office or other, was turned out by the marquis for presuming to come without a card. There was a scene; he refused to go, insulted his host by pretending he took him for the butler, and I believe the marquis threatened to horsewhip him.'

'No!' and the editor's countenance beamed.

'What a paragraph!'

'A lady in the question of course?' he asked. 'There always is.'

'A lady, yes—let me see,' Denis thought for a moment. 'Miss Blanche Astor, you are right—that pretty American everyone raves about—she induced him to come. Americans have not much tact, but he might have known better.'

'He did leave, I suppose, at Lord Craigietoun's bidding?' asked the man of news paper renown, wishing to get if possible a good finale to the story.

'That is the funny part of it,' answered Denis; 'he wouldn't go till Lady George Heriot, who is the sweetest woman and hates a scandal or a scene of any sort, came forward—she was quite sorry for her brother-in-law—gave him her arm and asked him to take her to her carriage. There was tact and delicate handling, if you like.'

'Indeed, this is a quite too delightful episode; I did not anticipate that I should hear anything half so racy when I sauntered into this house to-night.'

'Make the most of it—make the most of it,' said the exultant Denis. 'Your paper will be bought up with voracity, people always like to see a thing they know all

about in print. The *Libeller* comes out to-morrow, does it not?'

'Yes, in the afternoon.'

'Lucky editor to have heard this to-night. Ta-ta, I must be off. Late hours are bad for the nerves.'

Captain Denis passed down stairs in search of his coat, murmuring to himself, 'Happy inspiration! between the *Libeller* and Miss Blanche Astor it is strange if I have not got my friend this time.'

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PLAIN TRUTH.

FOR several days after Mercy had brought him home from Ben Haller's, Jim remained more or less in the house, being so morosely surly that she would have been almost happier if he had gone out. She was afraid to speak, almost to move about, lest by doing so she should arouse a storm of such magnitude that it would be impossible to subdue it.

'If only daddy will keep away,' was Mercy's chief thought; it would pain her, she felt, beyond expression for daddy to see what a terrible state of affairs existed between her and Jim.

She knew full well, though he had said but

little, how utterly Job disapproved of her marriage, and, true woman that she was, she was the more anxious that he should be the last person to discover its utter unhappiness. For that she *was* utterly unhappy there was little doubt, and whenever Jim was not looking, the tears would stream down her cheeks, to be wiped up hastily whenever he came near her; the seamed lines, however, that they left on her face did not escape his notice, and served to render him more irritable.

Mercy was dusting her irons, which stood now quite forsaken in a corner, and wishing the days would come back when she used to sing over her work, and taking it home, enjoy half-an-hour's chat with the servants in Chapel Street, when all on a sudden she heard some one in the shop, and knowing that Jim was doing a bit of carpentering in an outhouse, she was just going to attend to the customer when Susan walked straight in, looking round the room and taking everything in at a glance before she even condescended to hold out her hand to Mercy.

'Where's Jim—out again?'

'He is mending a broken chair. He will be here directly.'

'Oh, you're trying to hold him in, are you? But it's no use, he won't drive in harness,' and Susan set up a shout as though she had said a very clever thing, enjoying it all the more as she saw Mercy wince.

Mercy had the tact, however, to pretend that she was neither offended nor annoyed with her, and asked her civilly to stay and have some supper, which was just what Susan intended to do. So of course she accepted, and was already seated at the table, having taken off her bonnet and run her fingers through her frizzly curls, when Jim came in.

He did not look particularly glad to see her, or welcome her at all cordially. Even if he were not on the very best terms with Mercy, there had been no actual rupture between them, and he felt nearly sure that Susan's appearance in their home would lead to one.

'What brings you here?' he asked rather gruffly as he sat down. 'Have you heard any news?'

'News isn't always told for the asking,' said Susan ambiguously, with a toss of her little head.

'Where has that darned old mother of yours gone?'

Mercy gave a little 'hush,' as though horrified at the mode of his address; but Susan only laughed.

'She is not in Vale Street,' she said, 'nor the boy neither.'

'As if I didn't know that; but I've writ a letter this day by the post as 'ull bring the address pretty sharp, so you needn't tell if you don't like, Miss Pert.'

'Thank you, Mr Burritt, none of your nicknames, if you please.'

Jim sneered somewhat offensively.

'Daresay you ain't so partikler with the captain. He calls you what he likes, don't he? He's about as big a blackguard as goes about unhung, and he wont have the rope off his neck long if he tries to flummax me.'

Mercy, to whom these remarks were as unintelligible as if they were Greek, stared at them both in the vaguest astonishment.

Jim, noticing the expression of her face, turned the tide of the talk into another channel. It did not altogether suit him that Mercy should be made acquainted with the dark manœuvres in which he and the Fords, together with Denis, played such prominent parts. But be as insinuating or as brutal as he might to Susan—and he was both by turns — she always harked back to the subject of the boy. She did not say anything definite, but referred to it in the sort of way that was likely to quicken Mercy's curiosity, if she had any; and what woman has not?

Susan's object was to have her revenge on Mercy for marrying Jim—not that she wanted him herself; she was quite contented, for the nonce, with Captain Denis' admiration; but at the same time she was resolved to pay Mercy the debt she considered that she owed her for stepping between her and the man she had elected to captivate. It never occurred to Susan that Mercy was the first possessor of that bit of pliable sponge which Jim dignified with the name of a heart.

Gradually Mercy began to eat very slowly, and as if her food had no relish—it was a savoury dish, too. At last she dropped her knife and fork, still leaving several untasted morsels on her plate.

Jim started up.

'Come on, Sue,' he said, with a familiarity which almost bordered on the affectionate; 'put on your bonnet, and I'll walk a bit of the way home with you.'

She did as he bade her, without even answering. To carry Jim off out of his own house was a triumph for which even Susan had not hoped. She leant down and gave Mercy a kiss; but it was barely tolerated—certainly not returned, and then the pair started.

Mercy did not tell Jim not to be late, or in any way attempt to stop him from going with Susan—in fact, she scarcely lifted her head to look at them as they went out, but sat on for some minutes after they had departed, gazing at the supper dishes as though seeking from them inspiration as to what she ought to do.

After a time she pushed her chair away

from the table and went and crouched down before the fire with a little shiver, although the night was warm.

'He is my husband,' she murmured to herself; 'but is that any reason why—' She stopped, as if the thought of all she knew and all she had to suffer was to much for her tortured mind.

To do her duty in that state of life to which she had been called—as the Catechism says—had always been Mercy's earnest desire. What was her duty now?

How many an honest-minded wife has been puzzled by the question!

'Lady George's boy'! That was Lady George's boy that Jim and the Fords were hiding away for some reason of their own, —of that fact Mercy had become perfectly sure during the last half-hour.

She had seen the nursery in Chapel Street —knew the anguish of heart the poor bereaved mother was suffering; yet what could she do to palliate it, since the man who was creating it was her husband? The blood mounted to her brow as she thought of it. How she hated Jim at that moment!—how

she wished that she could go right away to some outlandish corner of the earth, and neither see nor hear any more of the horrible things that were going on!

Poor Mercy! she felt that she had not a friend in the whole world, for she dared not turn to Job and ask his advice. No, Jim was her husband. She must be silent, and guard his secrets till death.

She felt quite sure now that that was the loyal and straightforward path prescribed by duty; if she had halted in her opinion for a moment, it was only while she was first stunned by the horror of the situation. Besides, could her love for Jim be ever utterly quenched, whatever his sins against herself or others—even if duty prescribed it, would it ever be possible for Mercy to give him up to justice?

She was still crouching before the fire, with the supper things unmoved from the table, when Jim came in.

He had not been drinking, and was in high good humour, for by dint of spooning and cajoling Susan she had told him that her mother and Dandy, dressed as a little

girl, were gone to Brixton to live quietly for a while. She would not give him any more definite address; but now that Jim had got the latitude and longitude of their whereabouts, he thought it would be odd if he could not succeed in unearthing them.

When he saw Mercy, however, all his good humour fled in a second.

'What was she sitting droning there for?' he asked. 'Was a muddle like that a comfortable thing for a man to come home to? She wouldn't have dared treat Job like that.'

Mercy got up looking rather guilty, but not attempting to answer him. He, meanwhile, never ceased to rave at her during the entire time that she proceeded with her work of tidying. She was abashed and cowed, while he, the culprit, sought to brave the matter out with swagger.

Mercy, however, was no coward, it was only real sorrow that weighed her down. When she had done his bidding, and made the room look comfortable, she came and stood before him, and said very simply,—

'I am your wife, Jim. You may trust me.'

He turned suddenly as white as death. She did know the truth, then, he felt sure of it now; he had only been suspecting it all this time. He, however, only asked her brutally,—

'What the devil do you mean?'

'I know that the child Mrs Ford has taken away is Lady George Heriot's boy—but—but—I will not tell any one, because it may get you into trouble,' and Mercy gave a little convulsive sob as she finished her sentence.

'Very amiable and kind and good of you, I'm sure,' said Jim, with a sneer. 'I should like to see you telling any one about my affairs. I'd break every bone in your dratted skin!'

'I am not afraid of you, Jim, and I do not wish you to be afraid of me.'

'Afraid of you?' he shouted. 'Well, that's a good one too.'

'Yet folks do say,' she went on, 'that there's aught so dangerous as a woman's tongue.'

'If I hadn't thought as yours could be silenced, I shouldn't a-married you. Not

but what our marriage was a mistake, Mercy. You are too much of a saint for me.'

Mercy looked round the little parlour, but so very lately furnished and prepared for their reception, and heaved a deep sigh. She did not attempt to contradict him, for perhaps she too wished that that marriage could be unmade.

If Mercy had turned on him and treated him to some of the Billingsgate jargon Susan would have used with freedom, he probably would have liked her better; as it was, her silence was a reproach which irritated him, and the fact of her having lately become acquainted with two of his secrets made him hate her, because he loved her, strange paradox though it may seem.

There was no more talk between them that night; they went to bed maintaining a sort of moody reserve; and long after Jim's snores woke the echoes of the little house, Mercy's sobs soughed them a sort of plaintive accompaniment.

In the morning Jim was up betimes and went out, leaving his overtaxed wife to

carry on the business as best she could. Of course he had gone to Brixton; but he did not find the task he had set himself of ascertaining the whereabouts of Mrs Ford nearly as easy as he had expected; and between curses, loud and many, on Susan for not giving him the full address, he paid sundry visits to various public-houses, and by the time he reached his own house in the evening, with Mrs Ford still unfound, he was in no fitting state to present himself to Mercy.

She did the best she could, however; tried to soothe him and get him to bed, though even to her patient nature it was very hard to bear the taunts and reproaches he hurled on her, and which she felt she in no way deserved. On the morrow the same programme was followed, and yet for several morrows, Jim drinking harder and harder, and swearing louder and louder each day, because he could not find Mrs Ford, nor had succeeded in seeing Captain Denis, who was purposely keeping out of his way.

As for Mercy, she began to look so aged and wan, that she was scarcely recognisable

as the bright sonsy lass who had left her adopted father's home only two months ago. She never went near Job, though she thought of him perpetually, and wondered how he was getting on with his bit of housekeeping; but dreading lest he should question her, how could he go and see? If Mercy was anxious for tidings of Job, how far more desirous was she to know something about the child? Since she had left him, Job had contracted a habit of talking to the wax figure in the window. He was very lonely, and not altogether happy about Mercy, and as he did not care to tell his secrets to his acquaintances, he took the smiling-faced Amazon into his confidence, and would chatter away for hours, always of Mercy. Yet he scarcely guessed all that his darling was suffering. There are people, however, in the world whose chief gratification it is to tell others unpleasant truths whenever the opportunity offers, and such an occasion was not wanting now. Job was stitching away and murmuring to the Amazon in an undertone as usual, when the shop bell gave a little click. He

looked up, and a man, for whom he frequently worked, came in. He was a disagreeable, hard-featured looking man, who passed his life in what he called speaking 'the plain truth.' Not a very successful career to choose, judging from the general seediness of his appearance, and he was a master builder too. Folks did say that his poverty was only in outward appearance; that he had a power of money stored away in consols. Perhaps he had, but that had nothing to do with Job Jennett or his affairs.

The little tailor saw this Mr Murdoch come into his shop very unwelcomely. He was not a man for whom he cared to work.

He was civil, however, and took the orders he gave him with his usual care, wondering all the time what Mr Murdoch would say, for he had never known him to go away without leaving his sting.

He implanted it pretty firmly into Job's heart before he left him.

'Whatever did you let your girl marry that fellow Burritt for?' he asked gruffly, when the supposed business which had brought him to Smith Street was ended.

'Girls don't always ask their fathers whom they had best marry,' was the answer, given a little tremblingly.

'Well, she rues it by this time, I'll answer.'

Job looked a question he dare not put, for he knew Mr Murdoch's information was always authentic and not mere gossip.

'He's the drunkenest beast in the neighbourhood. I live down near their shop, you know. I saw her myself lead him from Ben Haller's one morning about ten days ago.'

'Who is Ben Haller?' asked Job.

'Don't know Ben Haller?—well, he keeps a low beer shop, where the worst spirits and the worst people about St Giles are to be found.'

'And Mercy brought Jim away from there?'

'Ay, did she; and I doubt if he has ever been sober since.'

Job had been standing up measuring his customer. He sat down on a chair in front of him and stared blankly.

'Yes, Mr Jennett, of course I am speaking

to you as a friend; you had best go and see after that girl.'

'What can I do,' whimpered Job despairingly, 'since she is married?'

Job, like Mercy, had great belief in marriage vows.

'I suppose husbands haven't got no right to kill their wives,' said the builder sternly.

'Kill!' cried Job, jumping up. 'Kill Mercy! I should like to see him,' and the little man was almost comic, though without the slightest intention of being so, so energetic was he in his anger against Jim.

'Well, I've done my duty, Mr Jennett, and told you what I know,' said the master builder, turning to depart.

It was not his custom to give any of his friends advice, he only tendered them 'the plain truth,' and left them to make the best they could of it according to their light.

Job sat down again after Mr Murdoch had gone, and looked very dreamy, almost as if he had become disturbed in his intellect for a time, then he began talking in a rambling way to the Amazon, as though she

were the goddess of good fortune and would help him.

To step between a man and his wife was not at all the sort of thing Job cared to do.

'Mercy had married this man of her own free choice, she must make the best of it,' he said one moment, following it next with 'drinks!' Lord bless her, if he drinks she can't bide there—supposing he was to kill her? but of course that's nonsense; however bad Jim may be, he do love Mercy, has loved her this many a day.'

Whilst he was wavering backwards and forwards between what was best and what was not best to be done, the shades of evening began to creep up over the long day, and Job, who had felt very disinclined to settle himself down to work ever since Mr Murdoch left, took out the shutters and closed the shop; then, without even stopping to tidy himself beyond washing his hands, he started for Mercy's new home.

The gas was lighted, and there was no outward appearance of desolation. She had worked very hard to keep things a little bit together, but her heart was nearly failing

her now. For two days and nights Jim had not been home. She had been to Ben Haller's to seek him, but he was not there, so Mercy could do nothing but wait and weep.

She was serving a customer when Job entered the shop, but one glance at her face sufficed to tell him how much truth there was in Mr Murdoch's tale. She gave a little cry of joy when she saw Job, but it was quickly followed by a shadow, and neither of them spoke till the stranger had gone away. Then Mercy took Job into the back parlour, and seated him in Jim's arm-chair, but they did not talk much. These two, who had been together for so many years, knew full well, without the need of telling, what the other had so keenly at heart.

'Best come back to Smith Street,' said Job at last.

'No, daddy, no, I cannot leave him,' answered Mercy with a little sigh.

'Leave him!' and Job thought for a minute, then he said with an effort, 'I'd put up with him there so that I might see after you.'

All the strength of Job's love for Mercy lay in that offer. She appreciated it to the fullest, for she got up from the hearth-rug where she had been sitting at his feet, and kissed him on the forehead, but she declined it firmly. How could she let Job know all she had to endure, how allow him to be subjected to rough answers, perhaps blows from Jim?

They sat on there for a few minutes longer, Mercy feeling calmer and more contented than she had done for days in the security of Job's loved presence, when the door was kicked open violently, and Jim reeled, rather than walked, into the room.

He was just sufficiently drunk to be savage, not stupid, and had apparently come home expressly to have a passage-at-arms with Mercy; seeing Job there by no means pacified him, on the contrary, it exasperated him almost to madness.

He attacked him, calling him by the vilest epithets, and then seizing Mercy by the hair, almost hurled her across the room. The little tailor, valiant-hearted though he was, was no match for Jim in his present condi-

tion, and, being a wise man, instead of fighting he tried to soothe. But nothing was of any avail. Jim was like a madman, he smashed several articles of furniture, threw the footstool at the looking-glass, and then turned with his double fists on Mercy, who was still standing at the farther end of the room where he had thrown her in the first instance. Job thrust himself between them, receiving a violent blow on the shoulder, and then set up a vigorous shout for help; a couple of neighbours rushed in having been fetched by the lodger upstairs, who was frightened by the noise, and, after a pretty stiff tussle, Jim was forced on to the ground, where one of the men sat on him till he could be properly secured.

Not being able to get at her, Jim ground his teeth and spat at Mercy, against whom all his fury seemed to be directed. Job caught her by the hand and led her out of the room.

'Get your bonnet, lass, and a few things, and come with me to Smith Street.'

'Oh, daddy! Yes, let me go with you.'

Poor Mercy! What use was there in her

struggling to maintain Jim's respectability, since he had so little regard for it, that he thus wantonly disgraced himself before his neighbours? And as for her affection for him, he had been steadily seeking to kill it for weeks past, and had well-nigh succeeded.

She would go with Job, kindly, faithful Job, who was ever ready to protect her from the rough storms of life. Perhaps a few days or weeks of separation might teach Jim to value her more, and the future might yet be bright.

CHAPTER XV.

AT BRIXTON.

MERCY never went back to the little tobacconist's shop, where Jim, watched constantly by two neighbours lest he should commit some personal violence, remained for several days in a strong fit of delirium tremens. When at last he sufficiently recovered to be left alone, almost the first use he made of his freedom was to lock up the house, take the key in his pocket, and go off no one exactly knew whither. It was not, however, to see Mercy. He probably was too afraid of Job to go near Smith Street till things had blown over a bit; in fact, so utterly did he seem to have disappeared from the scene that many of the folks about said that he

had taken what bit of money was left in the bank and emigrated to the colonies.

'And the best thing as could happen for all parties,' decided more than one of the neighbours; 'above all, for his pretty wife, whose life most certainly was in danger from him. Hard on Mr Jennett though, that it was, especially as there would be a baby in due course, and he would have to keep it. Fortunate that he was a good-natured man and well to do, or there was little doubt Mercy and her child would have to go to the workhouse.

Mercy, meantime, went back very quietly to her work in Smith Street. She had been away so short a time that many of the customers who brought her fine things to iron did not even know of her marriage, and with a little advertising on the part of Job, which brought her several new ones, Mercy was speedily in the full tide of work. She did not murmur or complain of her position, probably she was only too thankful to be home once again; but she was very silent and never sang nor laughed merrily, but worked persistently on for the sake of the

young life she felt in the future would be mainly dependent on her for support. If it had not been for this thought, Mercy would probably have sunk down utterly crushed by the weight of circumstances, and have taken no heed of her own well-being. Whether she lived or died would matter but little, she often repeated to herself, if it were not for that unborn babe. Then she would look over the blind on the door which divided the shop from the parlour as she passed backwards and forwards with her irons, and note the troubled, anxious look that had of late settled itself on Job's face, and not unfrequently her feelings would get the better of her, and if there were no customers about, she would go up to him silently, and twining her arms about his neck, would kiss him as she used to do when she was a little child. They neither of them said anything, but both of them felt how deep was the fund of affection that existed between them.

And so days grew into weeks and still no tidings of Jim. Both Job and Mercy believed, as the neighbours did, that he had

gone abroad ashamed. Perhaps Mercy in her secret heart hoped that he would one day return a repentant and a better man, but on no one else did such an idea dawn even for a moment. Job, though he did not say so, feared that he would return and claim his wife, and he felt assured that when he did so, there would recommence for Mercy a series of such hardship and ill-treatment as she would be little able to endure.

Probably no one gave themselves any trouble to make inquiries after Jim, or they might have found out more than it would have been exactly pleasant to ascertain. Mercy had been advised not even to go near the tobacconist's shop, but to remain quietly in Smith Street. It is very certain that had she done so, she would not have got in, since Jim had the key in his pocket.

The drinking bouts Jim had had of late had given him a shake both morally and physically. Morally, it had rendered him thoroughly ashamed of himself, and more averse to look Mercy in the face than ever; he was, in fact, beginning so

thoroughly to hate her on account of her superiority, that he resolved to skulk out of her way. Physically, his constitution was so impaired by the shock it had received that if he had not kept himself going by continual nips judiciously administered, he would never have been able to get about at all. Not that he went to the colonies, as some people suspected, he did not leave London, only the tobacconist's shop, without Mercy, was scarcely pleasant to him, and, moreover, it was already beginning to be fenced round with debts, which Jim was not sufficiently largely principled to pay up, though he had not yet entirely dissipated his uncle's savings. So he shut up his shop, slouched down the street with a somewhat unsteady gait, his hands in his trouser pockets just to make people believe that he was in an irresolute don't-care mood; but, once out of sight of his neighbours, he called a cab and drove straight to Captain Denis' lodgings in the vicinity of St James'. Few people knew his address,—Captain Denis therefore never thought of denying himself,

and being at home, in his shirt sleeves as usual, Jim was ushered in without warning.

'Hullo, Burritt,' said the captain, trying to be cheery, though he was by no means delighted to see Jim, 'haven't seen you for a long time!'

'No,' answered Jim very doggedly.

'Been ill?' asked the captain. 'You don't look well.'

A sort of savage light glared out of Jim's bloodshot eyes.

'If I was lying in the gutter it wouldn't matter to you,' he blurted out.

'My good friend, I did not think you had any chance of being in the gutter. You have a good home and a good wife.'

'Have I! Thanks to you, it seems to me as I have got neither.'

'How so—why, Burritt, what do you mean?'

'Well, it's all broke up, and it's your fault.'

'Bless me, I really don't understand.'

Captain Denis knew full well all about Jim's affairs, though he did not choose to pretend that he did; but he was at a

loss to conceive how the ruin in which he had been involving himself through drunkenness could be ascribed to him.

He was still more surprised at the man's next statement

'It is all along of you that my wife have left me and gone back to her father's place.'

'Why, I never set eyes on your wife in my life. Signor Belsospiro has probably far more to do with the matter than I have.'

Jim looked rather dangerously at the captain as he heard this remark, and answered with some fire,—

'My Mercy, she be an honest lass—she be. It's 'cos o' the trap into which you've lured me that she's taken herself off. She isn't a fool, isn't Mercy, and she knows as well whose child that is as Fords has got the keeping of as you do. She's worked for Lady George Heriot these many months.'

It was as though a thunderbolt had fallen at Denis' feet when he heard this speech. He had taken such pains to hide little Dandy's parentage from all the people he

had been compelled to employ, and it was most alarming to learn that Jim, of all men, had discovered the truth.

Of course Denis knew full well that his silence meant money—money too, in fairly large sums, and unlimited cash was exactly what he did not possess.

Lady George's fifty pounds had been spent long ago, and, according to Basil's advice, no more supplies had been sent him.

Deeply regretting that he had ever had anything to do with the matter, he sometimes had serious thoughts of returning the child, since his abduction had not brought him as near Lady George as he had intended it should; but that was no use as far as Jim Burritt was concerned, he would try to extort money quite as much by threatening him with punishment for the offence, whether the child were or were not restored to his mother. Besides, Dandy back in Chapel Street, the revenge, which was now so strongly mixed with his passion for Lady George, would no longer be gratified, and vengeance now was the dearest thing left to Denis.

The whole position of affairs presented

itself to his mind at once, as it is said to do to a drowning man, and he resolved to cling tenaciously to the unseaworthy barque in which he had seated himself. He had no money to bestow on Jim, that was true, but he must try to put him off for the present by a few promises; later on, it were strange if he could not fall upon some plan whereby to get rid of a troublesome customer.

'So your wife has been talking, has she? What a fatal weapon is a woman's tongue? How frequently it brings a man to destruction.'

'Mercy ain't a gossip,' struck in Jim warmly. 'She wouldn't say a word as would injure me, not if she died for it.'

'Then she had better say nothing about the share you have had in this child's concealment.'

'She won't, she won't,' assured Jim. 'I'd trust Mercy whatever befel.'

Strange the strong faith he had in her, considering the ill-treatment and neglect he had heaped on her.

'You think she would rather convict me?'

'Don't know as she ever heard tell on yer.'

This was exactly what Captain Denis wanted to know. He had only got Jim to contend with then; he would soon manage that besotted fool, for Jim had gone down many degrees in Captain Denis' opinion since he saw him lying drunk at Ben Haller's beer shop.

He would not, however, find him so easy to deal with as he imagined. Jim was obstinate and determined, and drink, unless he was absolutely overcome by it, only served to make him more so.

What he wanted from the captain was money, and he was by no means inclined to be put off with mere empty promises. 'He'd go straight to the police station from that very house; he'd go if he didn't see the sight of the coin,' and he repeated the assurance over and over again with the most aggravating pertinacity.

Captain Denis lost his patience and began to grow angry—all his fine speeches were wasted; to make them to Jim Burritt was like casting pearls before swine, as with thorough

pig-headedness he repeated over and over again the threat that he would have money or go to the police station.

At last Denis tossed him a sovereign.

He took it up with a sneer.

'How long do you expect this to last?' he asked.

'My good fellow, you shall have some more very shortly if you will only be patient—now do let me recommend you to go home and let this matter rest for a while. You shall be satisfied in every way. I am sure you have had no cause to complain of me hitherto.'

Jim pocketed the sovereign, but said he should not wait long; if a secret was worth keeping it was worth paying for. He went away, however, at last, because it had suddenly dawned upon his somewhat hazy brain that he did not know where the child was; but as soon as he had found Mrs Ford and her little charge, he determined not to give the captain much quarter. He was wary enough not to ask him where they had gone, for he knew he should not be told, and therefore thought it wiser not to allow him to guess that he was still in ignorance.

'Sha'n't go a-nigh Susan either,' he muttered. 'She is a spiteful devil. It's all through her as me and Mercy's parted.' So he started off to Brixton, resolving to remain lurking about there till he had accomplished his object.

Thus it befel that Job and Mercy fancied he had gone abroad, and all his neighbours lost sight of him, for Jim took a room at Brixton, even condescended to employ his time in a little carpentering by way of a blind. He could be persevering enough when he had an object to gain. Moreover, it suited him for many reasons to lie *perdu* for a time. Mercy, he knew, was being well taken care of; he could lay his hand on her and claim her any minute that the fit seized him. But days, even weeks passed on and Jim Burritt did not trouble the peace, either in Smith Street or in the bachelor quarters in St James'—in fact Denis hoped, or at least thought that he had perhaps taken himself altogether out of the world in one of his drunken carousals.

Mrs Ford was the only person who knew where Jim was. He had passed her window

more than once going to his work; but she had said nothing about it, and always managed to keep out of his way. Mrs Ford was a leery woman, and was quite aware that whatever money she got out of Denis—and he had paid her pretty liberally hitherto—Jim Burritt would expect her to share, so she resolved to endure the dulness of Brixton—and that Brixton was dull to a true cockney like Mrs Ford there is little doubt—rather than call Mr Jim Burritt in to enliven her as she frequently felt desperately inclined to do. One morning, however, she got up as usual, lighted the fire, and began to prepare some breakfast. She had been much kinder to Dandy since they had been alone together, and she was dependent upon him for company; in fact Mrs Ford was almost beginning to like the little boy, he was so gentle and loving, so grateful for any small kindnesses she might occasionally bestow on him.

'If he only would stop them sobs—she couldn't a-bear them, she couldn't, but she supposed they was a sort of constitootional.

On the morning in question he did not move when she called him to get up,—the

breakfast was ready, so she went up to the little bed—a mattress on two chairs which had been arranged for him close to her own —and gave him a shake. He opened his eyes and half raised himself, then he fell back without speaking on his pillow.

The child, the seeming little girl, was ill, there was no doubt of that, and Mrs Ford knew it, as she looked at him with a perplexed, half-frightened look on her face.

'If Dandy died, what trouble might she not get into it?' all flashed across her mind in a moment.

'Whatever should she do?'

She lifted him out of bed and sat down with him on her lap by the fire, and tried to feed him with some warm milk, but he shook his head and turned away, not, however, speaking a word, only occasionally uttering one of those half sobs, which even to Mrs Ford's hard senses always sounded so pitiful.

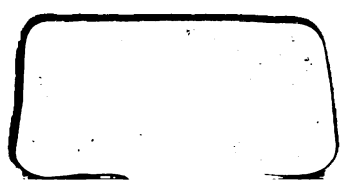
She managed to dress him at last in his masquerading clothes, and combed the fringe down over his brow. He seemed to have revived a bit, and sat on the floor playing in

an inert fashion with a rag doll which she had bought him when in a kindly mood.

'What's the matter with him I can't make out,' and she repeated over and over again; 'but he'll die, of that I feel positively sure.'

She watched him all the morning, and tried to tempt him with what she considered delicate morsels, looking as pleased when she succeeded in persuading him to eat a few crumbs of stale cake, and talk to her a little about Dolly as if he had been her own child. Yet it was only the fright lest he should die that was actuating her.

A few minutes after twelve Jim passed, and Mrs Ford, forgetting all the pecuniary reasons why she had held back from admitting him to her confidence, tapped against the window.

END OF VOL. II.

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